## REDEMOS

### RECONFIGURING EU DEMOCRACY SUPPORT. TOWARDS A SUSTAINED DEMOS IN THE EU'S EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

# Conceptual framework EU democracy funding

## Unpacking EU democracy assistance. What model of democracy does EU funding suit?

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# Executive Summary

As the first deliverable of Work Package 3, the main objective of which is to collect and analyse data on democracy funding by the European Union (EU), EU member states and other international donors, this working paper outlines a conceptual framework to provide a coherent structure for our further data collection and analysis efforts. The framework is designed to overcome many of the challenges of researching a phenomenon as difficult to capture empirically as 'funding for democracy', where donors continue to face challenges in accurately identifying what they are spending and where clear figures are often not available. This is partly because democracy assistance is often intertwined with other financial support, and comparisons between categories of aid from different donors are not straightforward. In this paper, we acknowledge that part of this apparent confusion is due to different understandings of what should be promoted in the name of democracy. Comparativists remind us that polities differ in the way their political institutions put democracy into practice. More recently, research has shown that individuals and collectives also differ in their understanding of democracy and, consequently, in what they expect from it. Drawing on this research, we make two contributions: First, we conceptually acknowledge the varieties of democracy in democracy assistance, and second, we empirically assess which of these varieties of democracy prevail in EU democracy assistance to the eastern neighbourhood countries, over time and across partner countries.

Our exploratory study shows that the EU mainly promotes a common understanding of liberal democracy, but not exclusively. Its investment in a peacebuilding variety of democracy assistance is significant and unsurprising, given the unstable nature of many of the hybrid political regimes in the region, the grave security challenges that virtually every single one of the six eastern neighbours is nowadays facing, and the authoritarian or authoritarianising nature of some of the regimes. At the same time, and unexpectedly, the participatory variety of democracy assistance has become more prominent over time, and in particular since 2013. The modest representation of the egalitarian model is to some extent unexpected, given the EU's alleged proclivity to focus on the socioeconomic conditions supporting democracy. The electoral and feminist models are the most scarcely funded of the six varieties of assistance proposed here. Whether EU democracy assistance is driven by declared strategic priorities and/or policy substance, or alternatively, by external events and shocks, remains an open question. Similarly, we cannot confirm that stability trumps democracy when it comes to the EU's approach to democracy assistance. What emerges, instead, is a mixed picture behind which it is difficult to discern consistent trends. Like so much of EU foreign policy, the provision of democracy assistance appears to unfold in an ad hoc or path dependent manner, as opposed to a strategic or externally reactive evolution. Looking forward, it will be important to continue exploring the preliminary hypotheses formulated in this paper, together with new ones, in addition to analysing additional data on EU member states and other international actors' democracy assistance in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, with a few to bringing to the fore key trends and puzzles in EU and international democracy assistance.

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# List of acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| CRS | Creditor Reporting System |
| DAC | Development Assistance Committee |
| ENP | European Neighbourhood Policy |
| EU | European Union |
| EUGS | European Union Global Strategy |
| EUMM | European Union Monitoring Mission |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| ODA | Official Development Assistance |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| V-Dem | Varieties of Democracy |

# 1  Introduction

The European Union (EU) and its member states are the largest donors of foreign aid, providing almost half of the world's development aid (European Commission 2020; Economist 2021). A significant proportion of this funding contributes to advancing and sustaining democracy, predominantly in the EU's neighbourhood. What exactly counts as funding for democracy support by the EU is an open question, one that has frustrated researchers and policymakers alike in their efforts to formulate clear research findings and policy solutions. Yet, if most of us agree that democracy is an "essentially contested" concept (Gallie 1955), then the same must be true of any approach, policy or funding initiative designed to support democracy. This assumption provides the starting point for this paper in that it inspires our attempt to conceptualise distinct models of democracy assistance, broadly in line with conceptualisations of models of democracy. We then aggregate EU foreign assistance to empirically map and trace these models over time and across a particularly relevant set of beneficiaries, the countries in the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

The last two and a half decades have seen a proliferation of scholarship on what can be broadly described by the "catch-all-term" (Hawkins 2008, 375) "EU democracy promotion". Despite this empiricist-pragmatic conceptual breadth, the focus of most studies has been relatively narrow. On one hand, the EU's strategies, instruments and the factors underpinning the EU's choice of approach has been a long-standing topic of interest (Jünemann and Knodt 2007; Magen and McFaul 2008; Wolff et al 2014; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011). On the other hand, the effectiveness and impact of EU democracy promotion activities on third countries has generated extensive literature (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008; Vachudova 2005). By contrast, comparatively few studies explore the democratic substance that the EU seeks to further (Wetzel and Orbie 2015; Hobson and Kurki 2012; Kurki 2013. However, Kurki's selection of democracy understandings other than the liberal model is insufficiently justified and appears "rather norm-guided" (Wolff and Zimmermann 2016, 520). And, while Wetzel and Orbie (2015) remain mostly at the declaratory level of the European Union's plans, programs and declarations when exploring the "substance of democracy promotion", they also address policy implementation (including financial support) but omit to clarify on what basis these concrete interventions qualify as "democracy promotion."

Indeed, part of the challenge in identifying the substance of the EU's democracy promotion efforts lies in the fuzzy boundaries of this sub-set of EU foreign policy. Broadly speaking, democracy promotion encompasses both coercive approaches, such as foreign interventions, sanctions, embargoes and conditionality, and non-coercive methods, including political dialogues, information dissemination and, most prominently, democracy assistance, which represents the most significant tool for advancing democracy nowadays (Burnell 2000, 7). While less extensive than the EU democracy promotion literature, an important body of scholarship focusing on EU democracy assistance has provided important insights into various aspects of this policy area, including its substance. Most commonly, it has been concluded that the EU adopts a developmental, as opposed to a political, approach to democracy assistance (Carothers 2009), focusing on the conditions supporting democracy rather than explicitly political variables. More than a decade and a half ago, Youngs (2008, 165-66) found that European donors (including the European Commission and EU member states) tended to fund human rights, justice, women's rights and good governance, while investing less than was typically assumed in the electoral dimension, channelling their support for parliaments and political parties through multilateral bodies and eschewing altogether the direct financing of political dissidents, opposition groups in exile and other politically sensitive groups (Youngs 2008, 165-66). These findings were largely corroborated by other, region-specific studies, which similarly pointed to the relatively small share of electoral support in the EU's democracy assistance, the lack of focus on political parties and a strong emphasis on allegedly non-political issues such as human rights, women and children's rights, as well as technocratic arenas such as state capacity-building (Huber 2008; Bicchi 2010; Bicchi and Voltolini 2013). These trends appear to have somewhat shifted more recently, with new pilot programs on strengthening multiparty systems and women's role in political parties, as well as a parliamentary strengthening program, being launched; enhanced electoral support through an increasing number of electoral follow-up missions, as opposed to merely the deployment of election observation missions; and growing direct funding aimed at protecting activists from authoritarian backlash through, for instance, dedicated human rights defenders funds (Godfrey and Youngs 2019).

As far as the eastern neighbourhood countries are concerned, scholars have found that EU democracy-related aid primarily targets the justice and police sectors, public administration reform and civil society, though the latter, interestingly, to a less extent than in the southern neighbourhood (Bossuyt et al 2017, 420). In Ukraine, the EU has been found to take a "very broad approach" supporting electoral processes, political and civil rights, horizontal accountability, as well as state administrative capacity, civil society and socioeconomic conditions (Stewart 2015, 120-24), with a similar picture emerging in so far as Georgia and Armenia are concerned (Konstanyan 2015, 137-44).

While providing much needed insights on the substantive focus, evolution over time and/or variation across countries and regions, these studies leave unanswered the more fundamental question of what these insights amount to in so far as the (ideal-typical) *model* of democracy advanced by the EU is concerned. Wetzel and Orbie (2011; 2015) have made the first systematic effort at engaging with this question, though their choice of "an adapted model of embedded liberal democracy" as their analytical framework ruled out the possibility of alternative models of democracy. Admittedly, international democracy promotion has been dominated by a mainstream liberal democracy approach to which the EU has been found to generally subscribe (Carothers 1997; Risse 2009; Kurki 2010). Scholars have observed that the specific model of democracy being promoted by an actor is often similar to the respective domestic political system. Referring to this phenomenon as "the problem of overspecificity", Carothers (1997, 121-22) finds that "it seems an endemic feature of western democracy promotion efforts that assistance providers promote what they know and admire most, which is almost always their own country's particular approach to democracy" (cf. Youngs, 2008: 166–167).

However, two arguments caution against taking for granted the EU's promotion of liberal democracy as a default model. First, democracy cannot be easily transferred from the EU supranational level to nation-states, which has led some to hypothesise that the EU's sui generis nature as a system of governance leads it to focus on a narrow good governance agenda, as opposed to a more expansive (liberal) democracy promotion approach (Reynaert 2011, 408). Second, a wide variety of polities and understandings of democracy prevail among EU member states (see Ferrín and Kriesi, 2016). It is therefore plausible to expect that EU democracy assistance will seek to advance more than just one *model* of democracy.

To ascertain this general hypothesis, we identify six models of democracy assistance with the ultimate goal of addressing the following research question: What model(s) of democracy is the EU supporting through the provision of democracy assistance in its eastern neighbourhood? This paper does not seek to provide a conclusive answer – a task more thoroughly addressed by two other deliverables, D.3.3 and D3.4 – but, primarily and according to its stated objective, to propose a conceptual framework that can ensure consistent collection of data on democracy assistance by the EU, EU member states and other international donors. In doing so, we align in our approach with recent attempts at conceptualising the multidimensional nature of democracy (Lindberg et al. 2014). Secondly, and beyond the original scope of this working paper, we tentatively apply the conceptual framework drawing on the six models of democracy to the data on democracy assistance provided by the EU Commission to the countries of the eastern neighbourhood. We conclude by outlining a new avenue of research that promises to enrich our understanding of EU foreign policy, EU democracy promotion and EU democracy assistance to third countries.

The advantage of our approach is twofold. On one hand, and compared to studies relying mainly on the declaratory dimension of the EU's democracy assistance, we explore what the EU funds in third countries, thus focusing on what it actually does, rather than what it claims to do. On the other hand, even though we do not address the impact of EU assistance (Gafuri 2022), our approach enables the important distinction between what the EU originally intends to do and the actual results of its democracy promotion activities. Our systematic but flexible approach allows others to adapt the publicly available data from the OECD to suit their own conceptual ideas of what may be subject to democracy promotion.

# 2  Alternative models of democracy assistance

Democracy assistance has been defined as financial support for "establishing, strengthening, or defending democracy in a given country" (Azpuru et al., 2008, 151). Yet, a "striking deficiency is that donors still generally struggle to identify how much they spend on democracy and human rights. Figures are not easily available, democracy aid is mixed in confusing ways with other funding (such as for public administration reform or peacebuilding), and aid categories are not directly comparable across countries. Even those policymakers responsible for democracy aid are almost always unable to say how much their country was spending on this objective" (Youngs et al. 2022). Since we cannot assess the effectiveness of democracy promotion without knowing what is being promoted, we propose a new approach to empirically identify which components of democracy are supported by donors.

In doing so, we follow the multidimensional disaggregation approach of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. Different types and models of democracy and their conceptual nuances have received considerable attention in academic discourse (Dahl, 2000; Held, 2006; Hendriks, 2010), and numerous efforts have been made to empirically assess these different models of democracy by identifying and quantifying certain indicators. Recognising that unless we can measure democracy in sufficient detail and nuance, we will neither be able to mark its progress and setbacks, nor influence its future course, the V-Dem project very prominently proposed a new approach to measuring democracy (Coppedge et al. 2011; Lindberg et al. 2014). To the five different 'varieties' of democracy that V-Dem distinguishes and disaggregates into more specific conceptual components - electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian - we add two more - a peacebuilding and a feminist component, while merging the participatory (direct-democratic) and the deliberative into a single participatory component, as summarised in Table 1 and outlined in what follows.

**Table 1.** *Varieties of Democracy Assistance*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Electoral core** | free and fair elections; party competition; accountability of and justification by the government |
| *Procedural models* | |
| **Liberal component** | rule of law; civil rights; checks and balances (courts); minority protection; freedom of press, expression and association; human rights |
| **Participatory component** | direct-democratic institutions; deliberation |
| *Substantive models* | |
| **Egalitarian component** | protection against poverty; reduction of income inequalities; social justice; social protection |
| **Peacebuilding component** | civilian peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution |
| **Feminist component** | gender equality; protection against gendered violence |

Albeit characterised by lively disagreement, democratic theorists broadly agree on the merits of a procedural definition of democracy. Going back to Schumpeter (1942 [1976]), democracy as a political method boils down to a competitive struggle for the people's vote. This ***electoral core*** of democracy embodies the essence of representative democracy, namely making rulers responsive to citizens through competition for the approval of a broad electorate during periodic elections. According to authors such as Dahl (2000), the electoral component is fundamental; without it, no regime can be called "democratic" in any regard. Support for the electoral component is provided primarily through assistance for free and fair elections of political leaders at regular intervals. Electoral assistance includes other assistance at the level of the polity related to the support of the electoral process, in particular electoral competition with parties presenting differentiated policy proposals, executive accountability (i.e. government accountability and enforcement) and full freedom of opposition parties to criticise the government (Bartolini 1999; 2000; Wessels and Schmitt 2008; Schedler 1999).

There seems to be further consensus among democracy scholars that holding elections alone is not enough for a democracy to function and be sustained. We therefore complement assistance of a democracy's electoral core with the assistance of two additional process-oriented (procedural, constitutional) components and three substantive components of democracy (cf., Tilly 2007, 7; Bühlmann and Kriesi 2013, 44). Procedural definitions of democracy refer to democratic processes, rather than to substantive policies or other outcomes that might be viewed as democratic. Next to the electoral component, the liberal and the participatory components are the most popular examples of such input-oriented understandings of democracy, in which political decisions are considered legitimate if they reflect the "will of the people" (cf., Scharpf 1970; 1999, 6-20). When juxtaposing procedural understandings of democracy with substantive, output-oriented understandings that define legitimate rule as effectively promoting the common welfare of the people, scholars tend to focus on the egalitarian component, emphasising material and immaterial inequalities (Lindberg et al. 2014; Ferrín and Kriesi 2016). With the peacebuilding and the feminist components, we add two more recent models of democracy that either centre on the prevention and mitigation of violence and conflict or on inclusion, social transformation and diversity from a feminist perspective. We follow a kit-based approach, with the electoral component as the core upon which the other components are built. It is important to note that these other components are not necessarily mutually exclusive, either conceptually or empirically. Theoretically, however, each of these components is rooted in different schools of thought.

In more detail, the **liberal component** emphasises the value of protecting individual and minority rights against the "tyranny of the majority". Among the indicators covered by the liberal component, the rule of law is the most fundamental. Without it, all other elements of democracy become meaningless, since the abuse of power by the state and its representatives jeopardises the achievement of most democratic principles. As the representative-liberal understanding of democracy has come to dominate in the post-Cold War era, actors and scholars have focused their policies on promoting such a model. Liberal democracy assistance complements the promotion of the equality before the law with the promotion of constitutionally protected civil liberties, freedom of the media, a strong and independent judiciary that monitors the legality of government decisions, and generally effective checks and balances (O'Donnell 1994; 2004; Dahl 2006). Prominent authors such as Peter Burnell and Laurence Whitehead recognise the limitations in the liberal conception of external democracy promotion. At the same time, they accept the liberal model as "the baseline for the contemporary debates about democratization" (Whitehead 2002, 26). Burnell, for example, laments that "[i]deas of social democracy and economic democracy are excluded" but acknowledges that it may be rather irresponsible for democracy advocates to promote models of democracy abroad that "are judged too risky to entertain at home" (Burnell 2000, 4).

A procedural understanding that goes beyond the basic model of liberal democracies is the **participatory component**, which is based on the idea of democracy as the empowerment of citizens to actively participate in decision-making in a direct and deliberative way (Pateman 1970; Barber 2003). Or, in the words of Barber (1984: 151): "[P]olitics in the participatory mode [...] is self-government by citizens rather than representative government". However, participatory democracy is not about abolishing all representative institutions, but about broadening the opportunities for participation by creating new arenas in addition to traditional representative institutions, often in small-scale settings. In the face of growing criticism of contemporary representative democracies, over the past three decades many countries have adopted direct democratic processes that allow citizens to directly influence policy outcomes; others have adopted deliberative processes to improve the quality of decision-making. While direct democracy and deliberation are distinct procedures (Gherghina and Geissel 2020; Teorell 2006), participatory processes can combine deliberative and direct democratic elements, as demonstrated in Ireland with its combination of first deliberation and then referendum (Farrell and Suiter 2021).

The remaining three components of democracy refer to different substantive outcomes. The ***egalitarian component*** is based on a social-democratic vision of democracy according to which material and immaterial (i.e. social) inequalities inhibit the actual exercise of formal rights and liberties (and political equality). According to Sigman and Lindberg (2019, 596), egalitarian democracy describes "a type of democracy in which citizens across all social groups are equally capable of exercising their political rights and freedoms, and of influencing political and governing processes". Egalitarian democracy thus works with some liberal democratic structures and procedures but adds to them an emphasis on social solidarity and structures for democratic control over economic processes (Tilton 1991). It advocates a form of democracy that emphasises protection against poverty, reduction of income inequality, social justice, social protection and social welfare. In their critical assessment of the EU's democracy promotion agenda in the Middle East, Pace (2011) and Teti et al. (2021) show that people's conceptions of democracy in the EU's Southern neighbourhood value social justice and socio-economic rights. In addition to guaranteeing civil-political rights, they expect democratic government to guarantee socio-economic rights.

The ***peacebuilding component***, in turn, recognises that the absence of armed conflict, localised violent conflict and a functioning, legitimate security sector are key elements of strong, resilient democratic societies (Mross 2018). At the same time, democracy promotion has become an important element of liberal peacebuilding (Paris 2010), based on the assumption that only a democratic regime provides institutions for the peaceful resolution of societal conflicts. Mansfield and Snyder (1995) sparked an ongoing debate when they pointed out that the process of democratisation can have destabilising effects. While others followed in arguing that certain preconditions - in particular a well-functioning state - must be in place for the electoral core to be promoted (e.g., Ottaway 2002; Fearon and Laitin 2004), others prominently called this "democratic sequentialism" a "fallacy" (Carothers 2007, 13). Instead, they advocate a more gradual approach that, for example, in societies emerging from violent conflict, allows political forces to get used to dealing with each other peacefully and to agree on the rules of the game before holding potentially divisive elections. In any regard, the peacebuilding component of democracy assistance emphasises the promotion of civilian peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution, in addition to democratic procedures of political decision-making.

Finally, we include a ***feminist component*** that responds to recent calls to strengthen women's political participation and protect gender equality to build, strengthen and protect democracy. Based on a feminist approach to development, which aims to challenge and transform unequal power relations and eliminate structures that perpetuate inequality and oppression, the feminist component goes beyond promoting women's equal participation in decision-making at all levels, addressing gender-based human rights violations such as sexual violence, and building capacity to promote gender equality. It sees gender-sensitive reforms and legislation as a means of promoting an inclusive and diverse society and advancing the interests of marginalised groups in general (Parisi 2020; Fraser 1990). Common feminist institutionalist strategies include the use of quotas, the design of gender-sensitive parliaments, advocacy on the selection of political party candidates and other reforms, some of which are increasingly common activities in democracy promotion projects (Bardall 2023, 191).

## 3  Expected trends and patterns

Drawing on the existing literature on (EU) democracy promotion policies and their conceptual underpinnings and the scholarship on EU foreign policy and democratisation more broadly, we formulate a set of tentative hypotheses about the trends and patterns we expect to empirically observe in EU democracy assistance. In line with studies of the substance of EU democracy promotion (Pace 2011; Kurki 2011; Wetzel and Orbie 2015) that tend to find that the EU predominantly advances a liberal model of democracy through its policies vis-à-vis third countries, ***we expect EU democracy assistance towards its Eastern neighbourhood to match***

***the liberal model of democracy (H1a)***. At the same time, however, given the EU's character as a hybrid polity and the variety of understandings and practices of democracy amongst EU member states, ***it is plausible to assume that EU democracy assistance towards its Eastern neighbourhood will promote more than one type (i.e. liberal) of democracy (H1b)***.

EU foreign policy is assumed to be driven either by internal or external factors. Internally, the nature of the EU's institutional arrangements, raising the well-documented challenges of coherence, consistency and coordination, has been prominently addressed in the literature (see for example Nuttall 2005; Gebhard 2011). Moreover, the EU's evolving international actorness has generated an ever-growing body of strategies, programs and framework policies which have redefined the parameters of EU foreign policy action. From this, we derive a ***strategic*** hypothesis which assumes that ***EU democracy assistance in its eastern neighbourhood is influenced by its strategic outlook and policy substance (H2a).*** The 2011 Review of the ENP introduced the notion of "deep and sustainable democracy" as the first out of four broad objectives of the new approach. In defining it as "the right to vote is accompanied by rights to exercise free speech, form competing political parties, receive impartial justice from independent judges, security from accountable police and army forces, access to a competent and noncorrupt civil service — and other civil and human rights that many Europeans take for granted, such as the freedom of thought, conscience and religion" (European Commission 2011), the EU essentially committed to advance a liberal understanding of democracy in its eastern and southern neighbourhoods. Consequently, ***H2a*** would lead us to expect a focus on the liberal democratic model of democratic assistance in the period following 2011. The November 2015 Joint Communication on the Future of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) outlined a strategy that sought to improve the resilience of individuals and societies, "notably by fighting poverty and inequality, so that over time home-grown positive change can emerge" (Biscop 2016). At the same time, it brought new focus on security sector reform, conflict prevention, counter-terrorism and anti-radicalisation policies. Together with the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS), the 2015 ENP review identified the EU's security as a key priority, while de-emphasising democratisation as an explicit objective of EU foreign policy. We therefore expect, in line with ***H2a***, to see a potential increase in the egalitarian model of democracy after 2015, as well as a more marked spike in the peacebuilding model as of 2015-16.

By contrast, it has been observed that the EU has often responded reactively to external events, defining its foreign policy priorities and taking action in response to exogeneous factors (Cross and Riddervold 2019). We therefore also put forward an alternative **reactive** hypothesis according to which ***EU democracy assistance in its eastern neighbourhood is influenced by external shocks and events (H2b).*** As a result, we expect to see an increase in EU democracy assistance for the peacebuilding model following events with security implications such as the Russia-Georgia war of 2008; Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas in 2014; the 2016 flare-up of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the subsequent 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh war; and Russia's invasion of and subsequent war in Ukraine in 2022. However, as our data only extends until 2022, the impact of the war in Ukraine on the evolution of the peacebuilding model of democracy assistance will not be possible to assess. The same applies to the most recent phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. For events such as revolutions and popular uprisings which result in an upward trend in democratisation (i.e. the Revolution of Dignity/Euromaidan in Ukraine in 2013, the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia, but not the 2020 protests in Belarus), we also expect to see an increase in the electoral and liberal democratic models of democracy assistance.

The failures of EU democracy promotion in its neighbourhood have long been attributed, at least in part, to the much-discussed stability-democracy dilemma in EU foreign policy. This tension in EU foreign policy goals has been faulted for the EU's lack of external effectiveness in advancing democratic governance beyond its borders and, more problematically, for contributing to stalling democratisation and/or the consolidation of autocratic regimes in target countries. As Börzel and van Hüllen (2014, 1044) point out, "the lower the level of political liberalisation and the higher the instability of a country, the more ineffective the EU is in asserting a democratic reform agenda in the ENP Action Plans, clearly favouring stability over change". The literature has shown this hypothesis to hold in particular for two categories of EU partner countries: the (potential) candidate countries of the Western Balkans which continue to struggle with simmering ethnic tensions and

a resurgence of nationalist discourses and practices (Gafuri 2018; Smith et al 2021), and the EU's southern neighbours, many of which are ruled by deeply entrenched autocratic regimes (Roccu and Voltolini 2018). To a much less extent has the stability-democracy dilemma frame been applied to the eastern neighbourhood, even though the six countries in the region have been and continue to suffer – in different configurations - from political instability, domestic and external challenges to their sovereignty in the shape of secessionist tendencies, external occupation or outright war on their territories, as well as autocratic rule. It is thus plausible to assume that the EU is likely to have prioritised security and stability over democracy in its foreign policy towards the eastern neighbours. For our purposes, this implies a much more prominent focus on democracy assistance targeting the peacebuilding dimension and an expectation that this would exceed the combined funding going towards the electoral and liberal democracy models. Consequently, we formulate a last hypothesis which assumes that ***funding for the electoral and liberal democracy models of democracy assistance is likely to be exceeded by funding for peacebuilding (H3)***

# 4   Methodological approach

To empirically determine the "what" – i.e. the type of democracy in EU democracy promotion, we rely on the Official Development Assistance (ODA), which is tracked and monitored by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). We operationalise democracy assistance according to the six models by aggregating the highly disaggregated ODA purpose codes according to the indicators that each of the models exclusively captures. Our flexible approach allows others to adapt the publicly available data from the OECD (https://stats.oecd.org) to suit their own ideas of what constitutes democracy support.

As Table 2 shows, we construct the different models of democracy assistance in such a way that they are distinct, with no overlapping purpose codes. In the Creditor Reporting System (CRS), donors assign the purpose of an aid contribution by answering the question "What specific area of the recipient's economic or social structure is the transfer intended to promote?" using five-digit purpose codes (OECD 2023). Each CRS code belongs to one and only one category; description of each purpose is jointly agreed by DAC members, with changes in their classification and description justified in publicly available reports by the DAC Working Party on Development Finance Statistics. Changes of the purpose codes relevant to us are insignificant; they relate either to further differentiation by splitting previous purpose codes into additional codes which we re-aggregate for our purposes, or to adjusting the clarifications to reflect recent developments (OECD 2019).[1] Table 2 shows the clarifications as they are given to the donors for reporting.

**Table 2: *Models of Democracy Assistance by DAC/CRS Purpose Codes***

| Purpose Code | Description | Clarifications |
|---|---|---|
| *Electoral core* | | |
| 15151 | Elections | "Electoral management bodies and processes, election observation, voters' education. (Use code 15230 when in the context of an international peacekeeping operation.)" |

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[1] Specifically, to improve the tracking of the Decent Work Agenda of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDG) Goal 8, in 2018, the two purpose codes 16010 "Social/ welfare services" and 16020 "Employment policy and administrative management" under the DAC5 sector 160 were adjusted so that each of the four pillars of decent work has their own purpose code, namely 16010 "Social Protection", 16020 "Employment creation", "16070 "Labour Rights" and 16080 "Social Dialogue" (OECD 2018a), all four of which we combine to construct the egalitarian dimension of democracy assistance. For other purpose codes, notably 15130 "Legal and judicial development" and 15160 "Human Rights" the description of the code was adjusted in 2018 so that it does not overlap with the newly created purpose code 15190 "Facilitation of orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility" created in reaction to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees (OECD 2018b).

| 15152 | Legislatures and political parties | "Assistance to strengthen key functions of legislatures/ parliaments including subnational assemblies and councils (representation; oversight; legislation), such as improving the capacity of legislative bodies, improving legislatures' committees and administrative procedures; research and information management systems; providing training programmes for legislators and support personnel. Assistance to political parties and strengthening of party systems." |
|---|---|---|
| *Liberal dimension* | | |
| *15113* | Anti-corruption organisations and institutions | "Specialised organisations, institutions and frameworks for the prevention of and combat against corruption, bribery, money-laundering and other aspects of organised crime, with or without law enforcement powers, e.g. anti-corruption commissions and monitoring bodies, special investigation services, institutions and initiatives of integrity and ethics oversight, specialised NGOs, other civil society and citizens' organisations directly concerned with corruption." |
| *15130* | Legal and judicial development | "Support to institutions, systems and procedures of the justice sector, both formal and informal; support to ministries of justice, the interior and home affairs; judges and courts; legal drafting services; bar and lawyers associations; professional legal education; maintenance of law and order and public safety; border management; law enforcement agencies, police, prisons and their supervision; ombudsmen; alternative dispute resolution, arbitration and mediation; legal aid and counsel; traditional, indigenous and paralegal practices that fall outside the formal legal system. Measures that support the improvement of legal frameworks, constitutions, laws and regulations; legislative and constitutional drafting and review; legal reform; integration of formal and informal systems of law. Public legal education; dissemination of information on entitlements and remedies for injustice; awareness campaigns." |
| *15153* | Media and free flow of information | "Activities that support free and uncensored flow of information on public issues; activities that increase the editorial and technical skills and the integrity of the print and broadcast media, e.g. training of journalists." |
| *15160* | Human Rights | "Measures to support specialised official human rights institutions and mechanisms at universal, regional, national and local levels in their statutory roles to promote and protect civil and political, economic, social and cultural rights as defined in international conventions and covenants; translation of international human rights commitments into national legislation; reporting and follow-up; human rights dialogue. Human rights defenders and human rights NGOs; human rights advocacy, activism, mobilisation; awareness raising and public human rights education. Human rights programming targeting specific groups, e.g. children, persons with disabilities, migrants, ethnic, religious, linguistic and sexual minorities, indigenous people and those suffering from caste discrimination, victims of trafficking, victims of torture." |
| *22030* | Radio/television/print media | Radio and TV links, equipment; newspapers; printing and publishing. |
| *Participatory dimension* | | |

| 15150 | Democratic participation and civil society | "Support to the exercise of democracy and diverse forms of participation of citizens beyond elections (15151); direct democracy instruments such as referenda and citizens' initiatives; support to organisations to [...] help citizens learn to act in the public sphere; curricula and teaching for civic education at various levels. (This purpose code is restricted to activities targeting governance issues. When assistance to civil society is for non-governance purposes use other appropriate purpose codes.)" |
|---|---|---|
| 15112 | Decentralisation and support to subnational government | "Decentralisation processes (including political, administrative and fiscal dimensions); intergovernmental relations and federalism; strengthening departments of regional and local government, regional and local authorities and their national associations." |

**_Egalitarian dimension_**

| 16010 | Social protection | "Social protection or social security strategies, legislation and administration; institution capacity building and advice; social security and other social schemes; support programmes, cash benefits, pensions and special programmes for older persons, orphans, persons with disabilities, children, mothers with newborns, those living in poverty, without jobs and other vulnerable groups; social dimensions of structural adjustment." |
|---|---|---|
| 16020 | Employment creation | "Employment policy and planning; institution capacity building and advice; employment creation and income generation programmes; including activities specifically designed for the needs of vulnerable groups." |
| 16050 | Multisector aid for basic social services | "Basic social services are defined to include basic education, basic health, basic nutrition, population/reproductive health and basic drinking water supply and basic sanitation." |
| 16070 | Labour Rights | "Advocacy for international labour standards, labour law, fundamental principles and rights at work (child labour, forced labour, non-discrimination in the workplace, freedom of association and collective bargaining); formalisation of informal work, occupational safety and health." |
| 16080 | Social Dialogue | "Capacity building and advice in support of social dialogue; support to social dialogue institutions, bodies and mechanisms; capacity building of workers' and employers' organisations." |

**_Peacebuilding dimension_**

| 15220 | Civilian peace-building, conflict prevention and resolution | "Support for civilian activities related to peace building, conflict prevention and resolution, including capacity building, monitoring, dialogue and information exchange. Bilateral participation in international civilian peace missions such as those conducted by the UN Department of Political Affairs (UNDPA) or the European Union (European Security and Defence Policy), and contributions to civilian peace funds or commissions (e.g. Peacebuilding Commission, Peacebuilding thematic window of the MDG achievement fund etc.). The contributions can take the form of financing or provision of equipment or civilian or military personnel (e.g. for training civilians):" |
|---|---|---|

| 15210 | Security system management and reform | "Technical co-operation provided to parliament, government ministries, law enforcement agencies and the judiciary to assist review and reform of the security system to improve democratic governance and civilian control; technical co-operation provided to government to improve civilian oversight and democratic control of budgeting, management, accountability and auditing of security expenditure, including military budgets, as part of a public expenditure management programme; assistance to civil society to enhance its competence and capacity to scrutinise the security system so that it is managed in accordance with democratic norms and principles of accountability, transparency and good governance." |
|---|---|---|
| **Feminist dimension** | | |
| 15170 | Women's equality organisations and institutions | "Support for institutions and organisations (governmental and non-governmental) working for gender equality and women's empowerment." |
| 15180 | Ending violence against women and girls | "Support for institutions and organisations (governmental and non-governmental) working for gender equality and women's empowerment." |

We limit our empirical analysis to "EU institutions" (Code 2102) as donor, which refers to "the share of the EC development budget attributed to the reporting country" (OECD 2010, 30). At a later stage, we plan to contrast the conceptual democratic underpinnings of EU democracy assistance with those of its member states and possibly also other relevant donors. Specifically, we focus on EU aid commitments, rather than actual disbursements, in the period 2005-2022. According to the DAC definition, a "commitment is a firm written obligation by a government or official agency, backed by the appropriation or availability of the necessary funds, to provide resources of a specified amount under specified financial terms and conditions and for specified purposes for the benefit of a recipient country or a multilateral agency" (OECD 2010, 9). As such, commitments measure a donor's intentions in a given year and allow to monitor the targeting of resources to specific purposes and recipient countries. They fluctuate as aid policies change and reflect how donors' political commitments translate into action. Non-disbursement of aid, in turn, may be motivated by factors outside a donor's intention, such as a lack of absorptive capacity in the recipient country. We exclude multilateral aid commitments that benefit whole regions, for example.

# 5  Empirical mapping

In 2005-2022, the level of assistance from the European Commission to the countries of the eastern neighbourhood experienced considerable growth. Overall, assistance increased from $159,137 in 2005 to $13,167,083 in 20222. However, the positive trend was not steady. As shown in Figure 1, the general assistance from the European Commission went through three major spikes. The first spike in aid to the eastern neighbourhood countries happened in 2014 and accounted for $17,193,510 in total assistance. The second rapid increase was in 2016, measuring $23,580,981. The third and final spike took place in 2021, when the European Commission committed to transferring $22,466,675.

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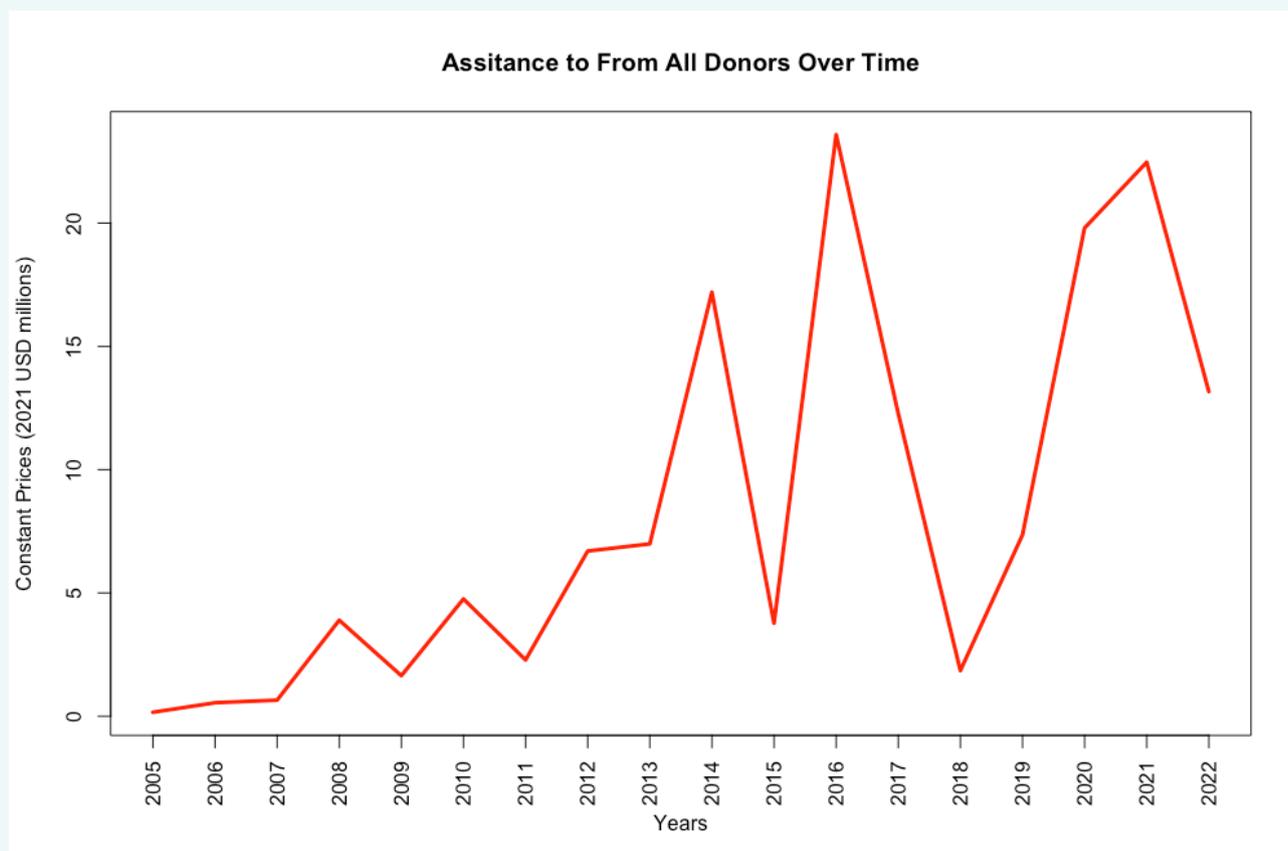2 Here and further in the text, the assistance is measured in constant prices (2021 USD).

**Figure 1:** *Assistance from the European Commission to the eastern neighbourhood countries, 2005-2022*

In line with our theoretical expectations, the European Commission was most keen to provide assistance to the countries of the eastern neighbourhood within the liberal model of democracy (see Figure 2). Out of 71 assistance projects within this model (which accounted for 44.7% of the total number of the European Commissions' assistance to the eastern neighbourhood countries), 36 projects directed funds to relevant NGOs, 12 to the central governments, 11 to public sector institutions, and 4 to the divisions of international organisations located in recipient countries. The average project size for the liberal model of democracy was also quite significant - almost $751,938. Thus, it can be concluded that the European Commission was most interested in promoting human rights, rule of law, media freedom and reliability, as well as horizontal accountability, rule of law, and checks and balances. Human rights were the most popular category, accounting for 49.3% of observations, accounting for $870,784 in funding. These projects were smaller relative to other assistance transfers within the liberal model of democracy. In fact, when the code (15160) for the human rights funding was excluded from the analysis, the average project size increased to $1,241,103. Overall, projects focused on sector budget funding and project-type interventions were better funded than human rights projects. In general, the largest outliers in terms of total project size focused on reforms targeting anti-corruption, law enforcement, and judicial system. These projects belong to the legal and judicial development and accounted for 33.8% of cases within the liberal model. In the period 2018 – 2021, a steady upward trend can be observed in the overall funding for the liberal democracy model, with the large majority of aid going to Ukraine. In 2019, the European Commission sent $3,933,092 to Ukraine, in 2020, $3,580,597, and in 2021, $11,107,140. By comparison, it provided Armenia and Georgia with $76,789 and $241,481, respectively, in 2019; Moldova with $1,303,875 in 2020; and again, Armenia and Georgia with $70,956 and $684,579, respectively, in 2021. Thus, the funding for liberal democracy in 2019, 2020 and 2021 was concentrated on Ukraine.

The next most substantial model was the peace-building dimension. While it accounted for 25.4% of all assistance provided by the European Commission to the countries of the eastern neighbourhood in 2005-2022, the peace-building dimension included only nine projects. The average size of the assistance was the greatest across all models of democracy - $3,843,128. The European Commission was reluctant to provide

assistance directly to the recipient governments. Instead, projects mostly funded public sector entities (4 observations out of 9 total), NGOs (2 observations), and international organizations (2 observations). These projects provided assistance to Armenia in 2010, Moldova in 2011-2012, Georgia in 2014 and 2020-2022, and Ukraine in 2019. 6 (out of 9 projects total) within the peace-building dimension focused on civilian peacebuilding, such as improving communication among NGOs, promoting the usage of mother-tongue, aiding internally displaced individuals, and building capacity for policy debate. The rest of the projects (3) funded the activities of the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia.
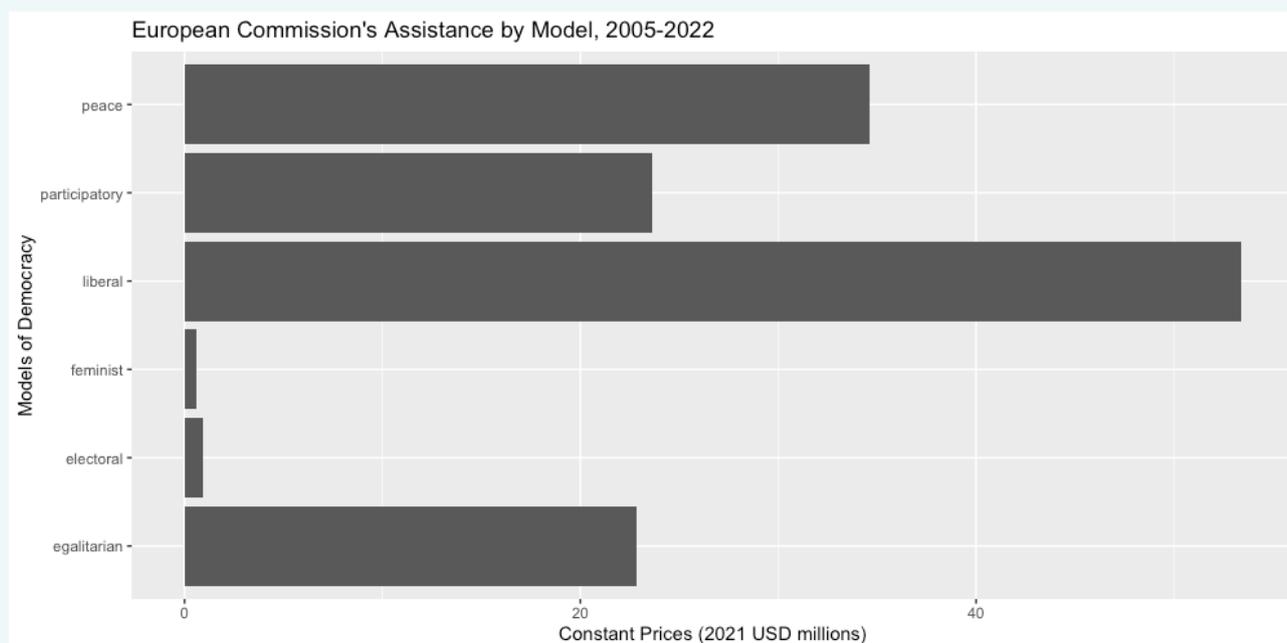


**Figure 2:** *European Commission's Assistance by Model, 2005-2022*

As suggested by Figure 3, peace-building efforts were a driving factor behind the majority of fluctuations mentioned before. The first major spike happened in 2014, when the European Commission transferred $15,636,446 to Georgia to fund the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia. The second spike was at first driven by the liberal dimension, when Armenia received $12,193,890 for legal and judicial development in 2016 and then, again, by the peace dimension in 2021-2022. The latest years in the time framework under investigation marked two large consecutive transfers to Georgia of $8,326,644 and 8,019,829 respectively, again to fund the activities of the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia. In fact, Figure 4, which illustrates assistance without the peace-building dimension, shows only two sharp increases in funding in 2016 and 2021, all due to the liberal dimension of democracy.
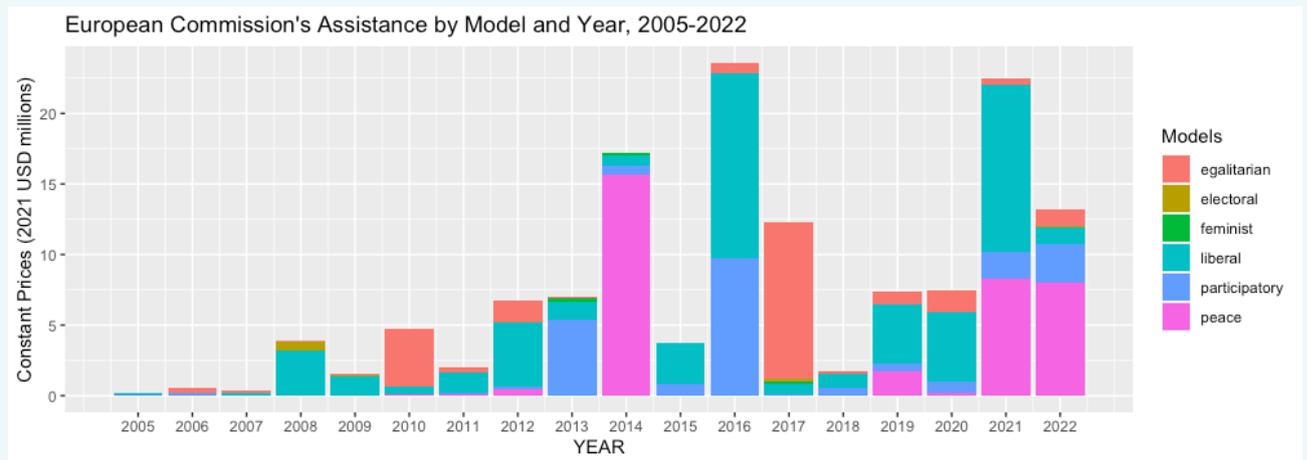
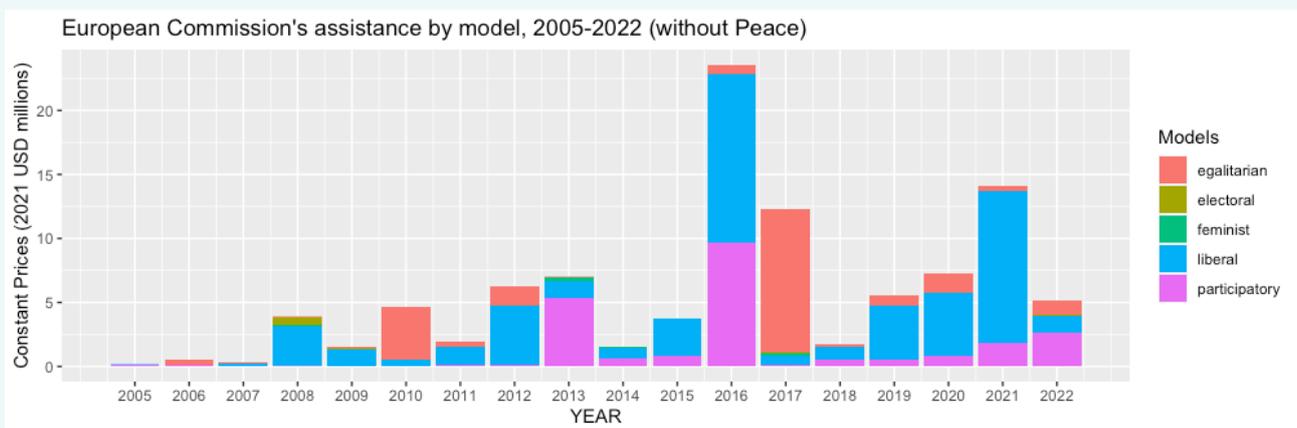**Figure 3:** *European Commission's Assistance by Model and Year*



**Figure 4:** *European Commission's Assistance by Model and Year (without Peace Dimension)*

The only other dimension which experienced considerable growth and fluctuation over time was the participatory dimension. The assistance within the participatory dimension model of democracy first sharply increased in 2013. However, the largest spike happened in 2016, when the European Commission transferred to Ukraine $9,260,938. It was the funding for the *U LEAD with Europe* project, associated with the decentralisation reform in Ukraine. In fact, taking out the code assigned to the decentralisation reform (15112), decreases the total number of projects in this model from 41 to 29. The latter suggests the promotion of fiscal and self-governance reforms in the eastern neighbourhood played a crucial role in the participatory model of democracy. The average participatory project size was $576,534. The majority of projects were directed at promoting civic engagement of recipient countries' citizens, sponsoring civic education, organising communication events and cultural exchanges, and working with youth. NGOs were the final recipients of assistance in 25 projects (out of 41 total), the recipient governments in 12 projects, and the international organisations in 5 projects.

The egalitarian model of democracy accounted for a similar share of total assistance, 17.38%. The average project size was also similar to the participatory model, $576,534. There were only 27 projects in 2005-2022. 8 of them transferred funds to NGOs, 7 to public sector institutions, and 5 to recipient governments. The egalitarian model of democracy had one spike in 2017, when the European Commission provided the Georgian government with sector budget assistance for employment and vocational training worth $11,108,331. There were no other major outliers in funding within this model of democracy.

The European Commission sent the least funding within feminist and electoral models of democracy, which suggests their relatively lower importance for the purposes of democracy promotion in the countries of the eastern neighbourhood. More specifically, the average project size was $151,846 for the feminist model of democracy and $132,762 for the electoral model. The European Commission sponsored only 4 projects within the feminist model of democracy in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Half of these projects were directed at the promotion of equal rights, and half addressed the issue of domestic violence. Similarly, there were only 7 projects within the electoral model. 5 of them funded local NGOs. The main purpose of these projects was to raise awareness of voting rights, promote electoral integrity and government accountability, and ensure access to balanced electoral information. Armenia was the most well-funded country of the eastern neighbourhood within this model of democracy and received $284,174 in assistance. Azerbaijan received $132,495 and Georgia received $190,716. Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus did not receive any assistance for the feminist model of democracy. By comparison to the conceptual definition of the electoral core, the European Commission's assistance completely omitted party competition, which is typically supported by political foundations in individual member states.

# 6  Discussion and outlook

Democratic norms seem increasingly challenged on the global stage. These challenges have arisen not only from authoritarian regimes but also from democratically elected governments, including those in established liberal democracies (Bermeo 2016; Diamond 2015; Wolff et al. 2016; Youngs 2015). The concept of international democracy promotion, defined as the array of actions taken by external actors to establish, stabilise, and enhance democratic institutions and practices in other (non-member) states, has encountered critique or outright opposition worldwide. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that since the early 2000s, a considerable number of governments have either restricted or completely shut down the space for international democracy assistance (Cooley 2015; Dupuy et al. 2016). Nevertheless, we still know little about how the challenges to democracy as a global norm are connected to the challenges to democracy promotion as an international endeavour.

The work by Bridoux (2013), Hobson (2009) and Kurki (2010) suggests that democracy promotion is contested, and hence risks having little effect because of conflicting ideas of what ought to be promoted in the name of democracy. They tend to (implicitly) equal the contestation of democracy promotion with the contestation or outright rejection of the allegedly prevailing liberal democracy model in democracy promotion. Eventually, different models recognise variation in the meaning and scope of democratic politics. They have significantly diverging views of how society is structured, how democracies function and also of the normative justifications for democracy (cf., Kurki 2010, 373). It might well be that not the international practice of promoting democracy from abroad is contested but that what is promoted does not correspond to the views and expectations of the recipient societies and elite.

In this working paper, we propose to engage more seriously with the ideational dimension of international democracy promotion. While we do not set out to examine the "fit" between the substance of EU democracy assistance in its eastern neighbourhood with local conceptions of democracy, obtaining an understanding of what model of democracy the EU seeks to advance in these countries is the first key step for this subsequent analysis.

As Figure 2 illustrates, both of our hypotheses with regards to the EU's preferred model of democracy assistance were confirmed (*H1a* and *H1b*), underlining the well-documented dominance of the liberal democracy model, but at the same time emphasising the EU's plural approach to democracy promotion through democracy assistance. All models of democracy assistance identified in our framework were represented, albeit to considerable different degrees. As already pointed out, the core electoral and the feminist dimensions received the least funding. As far as the former is concerned, this is in line with previous findings, which noted that, despite being criticised for having a "myopic strategy for democracy promotion"

which focuses narrowly on elections, the EU does not, in fact, provide significant funds towards electoral support (Youngs 2008, 165). The poor representation of the feminist model is more surprising, though, running counter previous findings which identified women's rights as one of the "favourite themes" of EU democracy assistance more generally (ibid), and in particular with respect to authoritarian regimes which are more likely to accept non-political aid (Bicchi 2010). Our country cases do not confirm this pattern, with both Belarus and Azerbaijan receiving considerably less assistance supporting women's rights organisations than Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine. Both the egalitarian and participatory models have experienced fluctuations over the past decade, attributable mainly to the existence of single large-scale projects which produced marked spikes in 2017 and 2016, respectively. Notably, the participatory dimension emerged as relevant only as of 2013 and is driven significantly by the provision of support for decentralisation reform in Ukraine.

The *strategic* hypothesis according to which *EU democracy assistance in its eastern neighbourhood is influenced by its strategic outlook and policy substance (H2a)* enabled us to formulate two concrete expectations with regards to the prevalence of specific models of democracy assistance following important changes in the strategic priorities of the European Neighbourhood Policy. These concern, most notably, the two review processes of the ENP in 2011 and 2015, respectively, and the EUGS of 2016. The first expectation was that, following the 2011 ENP Review's focus on "deep and sustainable democracy", the liberal democratic model of assistance would receive significantly more funding than before. As Figures 3 and 4 show, this was indeed the case in 2012, when we observe a marked increase in democracy assistance for the liberal democracy assistance dimension. The second expectation anticipated an increase in funding for the egalitarian and peacebuilding models following the 2015 ENP Review and the EUGS, only the former of which could be confirmed in 2017. As far as the peacebuilding dimension is concerned, no notable increase can be discerned between 2015 – 2018. Therefore, the data only partially confirms *H2a.* Moreover, the spikes in the liberal democracy model in 2012 and in the egalitarian model in 2017 were short lived, only applying to these singular years, raising the question of whether they can be said to mark a change in policy or a response to new strategic priorities.

Our findings by and large run counter to the widely accepted view that the EU's foreign policy is driven by major external events and crises (Sherriff and Veron 2024), as posited by *H2b*. In fact, most of the events with security implications which took place in the eastern neighbourhood countries between 2008 and 2020 did not lead to immediate or significant increases in levels of funding for the peacebuilding dimension. The sharp spikes in this model of democracy assistance took place in 2014, 2021 and 2022 and were all accounted for by the budget for the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) to Georgia. While the EUMM was indeed deployed by the EU in the aftermath of the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, it would be difficult to argue that the continuing financing of this mission over a decade and a half counts as a "reactive" policy decision in response to major events with security implications in the eastern neighbourhood countries. We also do not see major upward shifts in funding for the liberal democracy dimension which correlate with the Revolution of Dignity/Euromaidan in Ukraine in 2013 or the Velvet Revolution in Armenia.

The peacebuilding dimension emerged as the second largest after the liberal democratic one, contradicting *H3*, which expected funding for the former to exceed the combined total for the electoral and liberal democratic models. This assumption was based on the alleged trade-off between democracy and security considerations in EU foreign policy, a phenomenon which has been argued to inform EU approaches to democracy promotion in its neighbourhood (Dandashly 2020, 76). Given the long-standing security challenges faced by the six countries covered here, most of which have experienced war, secession and subsequent contested or incomplete statehood, the EU was expected to prioritise security and stability through funding for peacebuilding, as opposed to the electoral and liberal democratic political elements of democratic rule. That this expectation was not borne out by the data potentially points to the EU's approach of ensuring security through democracy, which characterised the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), rather than the 2015 ENP review and the 2016 EUGS's proclaimed prioritisation of security. Al the same time, it has long been claimed that the EU is reluctant to adopt a security-first approach in the eastern neighbourhood for fear of antagonising Russia. More in-depth analysis of the micro-dynamics of the peacebuilding model of EU democracy assistance needs to be carried out before any of these arguments can be conclusively made.

In sum, the EU promotes liberal democracy in the eastern neighbourhood, but not exclusively. Its contribution to a peacebuilding variety of democracy assistance is significant and unsurprising, given the unstable nature of many of the hybrid political regimes in the region, the grave security challenges that virtually every single one of the six eastern neighbours is nowadays facing, and the authoritarian or authoritarianising nature of some of the regimes. What is in fact surprising is the fact that not more democracy assistance was channelled towards peacebuilding, and that, in fact, the financing for the liberal democracy model exceeded that for the peacebuilding model. This is a finding worth exploring further. At the same time, and unexpectedly, the participatory variety of democracy assistance has become more prominent over time, and in particular since 2013. Most of this appears to be driven by the considerable amount of funding dedicated by the EU to decentralisation reform in Ukraine, but, moving forward, it will be interesting to explore in depth the content and evolution (both over time and across countries) of this model. Another model which deserves further exploration is the egalitarian one. Its modest representation is somehow unexpected, given previous arguments in the literature that the EU is pursuing a 'developmental model' of democracy assistance (Carothers 2009), that is, one focused on the socioeconomic conditions supporting democracy. As elaborated above, the electoral and feminist models are the most scarcely funded of the six varieties of assistance proposed here. While the literature had already identified the small share of electoral support in the EU's overall democracy assistance, future qualitative analyses could explore why the EU is not making the "electoral core" a priority in a region which over the past two decades has experienced at least four episodes of pro-democratic regime change against the background of rigged elections. The same question can and should be raised with respect to support for women's rights and gender equality, particularly as this issue area is an allegedly non-political one and likely to encounter less resistance from deeply entrenched autocrats.

Whether EU democracy assistance is driven by declared strategic priorities and/or policy substance, or alternatively, by external events and shocks, remains an open question. The evidence is inconclusive and invites further investigation based on careful process-tracing to detect, substantiate and contextualise causal relationships. Similarly, we cannot confirm that stability trumps democracy when it comes to the EU's approach to democracy assistance. What emerges, instead, is a mixed picture behind which it is difficult to discern consistent trends. Like so much of EU foreign policy, the provision of democracy assistance appears to unfold in an ad hoc or path dependent manner, as opposed to a strategic or externally reactive evolution. Sharp upward trends are explained in the majority of cases by large single projects directed at individual countries, making it difficult to attribute a more general trend to such developments. Looking forward, it will be important to continue exploring the preliminary hypotheses formulated in this paper, together with new ones, in addition to analysing additional data on EU member states and other international actors' democracy assistance in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, with a few to bringing to the fore key puzzles and, to the extent that they exist, trends in EU and international democracy assistance. These insights will form an indispensable knowledge base for assessing the crucial issue of whether there is congruence between the substance of EU democracy assistance and the conceptions of democracy prevalent in the eastern neighbourhood countries, as well as local stakeholders expectations vis-à-vis the EU.

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