REDEMOS

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

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The role of the United States in the political transition of the EU's eastern neighbourhood

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Executive Summary

U.S. democracy assistance in the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) region has varied in scope, consistency, and effectiveness across countries, shaped by both geopolitical priorities and domestic political conditions. Ukraine has been the primary recipient, receiving substantial and steady funding even before the outbreak of war in 2014. This reflects a long-standing U.S. interest in strengthening Ukraine's democratic resilience, particularly through participatory and peacebuilding models of democracy assistance. The 2020 peak in funding underscores the heightened U.S. support in the context of active conflict and reform momentum. Georgia has received diversified support across democratic models, though its funding has been less consistent over time. Periods of reform were met with robust assistance, but political instability and backsliding in recent years have disrupted this trajectory. Armenia has similarly seen modest but focused support, especially in decentralization efforts, though recent declines may indicate waning confidence in reform progress. Moldova has benefited from targeted support in participatory governance, especially in recent years, with a focus on administrative capacity-building rather than broad political reforms. The total volume of aid remains moderate compared to the region's frontrunners. Azerbaijan's aid profile is defined by a singular spike in 2006, with subsequent funding modest and irregular, limited by its entrenched authoritarianism. In Belarus, U.S. efforts have centred on civil society resilience within an increasingly closed political environment, with little room for broader democratic programming. Overall, while U.S. assistance has supported some meaningful democratic development, its impact is constrained in autocratic contexts. Effective aid requires flexibility, long-term commitment, and alignment with local political will and reform windows. U.S. assistance has played a vital but uneven role in supporting democratization in the EN. In Ukraine, it strengthened civil society after Euromaidan, though war and corruption limit consolidation. Georgia remains a notable success, with post-Rose Revolution support bolstering media, judiciary, and civic activism, even if later backsliding has weakened progress. In Armenia, aid contributed to the 2018 Velvet Revolution, advancing electoral integrity and peaceful transition. Moldova shows mixed outcomes: reforms have been encouraged, but state capture and interference remain major barriers. In contrast, Belarus and Azerbaijan highlight the limits of external support, where entrenched authoritarian regimes have largely neutralized U.S. efforts, leaving only modest space for civil society. Overall, the impact of assistance is context-dependent, most effective in semi-open systems with strong domestic demand for reform. By adjusting strategies to reward democratic gains and respond to backsliding, U.S. aid has proven instrumental in building civil society resilience and institutional safeguards, even if its influence remains constrained in closed regimes.

List of Terms and Abbreviations

ABA	American Bar Association
ADB	Asian Development Bank
BTC	Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (pipeline)
CDCS	Country Development Cooperation Strategy
CEPPS	Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
CRS	Congressional Research Service
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization CSTO
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EN	Eastern Neighbourhood
EU	European Union
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
IRI	International Republican Institute
MCC	Millennium Challenge Corporation
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
NSS	National Security Strategy
NSSG	National Security Strategic Guidance
OGP	Open Government Partnership
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PAS	Party of Action and Solidarity (Moldova)
PfP	Partnership for Peace

ROLI	Rule of Law Initiative
U.S.	United States
U.S. DoS	United States Department of State
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy
G.W. Bush	George W. Bush

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1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, the United States has been a key actor in promoting democratic development in the European Union's Eastern Neighbourhood (EN), comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. This region—situated at the fault line between Euro-Atlantic institutions and Russian-led spheres of influence—has become increasingly significant in U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the context of renewed great-power competition. U.S. democracy assistance in the EN has combined normative objectives with strategic considerations, fluctuating in its intensity, focus, and methodology across countries and administrations. While the overarching aim has been to encourage democratic transitions and state resilience, the outcomes have been shaped by both domestic political will and the broader geopolitical climate.

This paper explores the trajectory of U.S. assistance to the EN from the late 2000s to 2024, analyzing its strategic aims, implementation patterns, country-specific approaches, and overall impact on democratic development. Democracy promotion has featured prominently in U.S. foreign assistance frameworks, as outlined in National Security Strategies and implemented through instruments such as USAID, the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), and cooperation with international NGOs and local civil society organizations. However, the consistency and effectiveness of this assistance have been uneven, often constrained by recipient countries' internal dynamics, governance quality, and external pressures—especially from Russia.

Ukraine and Georgia have historically received the highest levels of support, especially following major political crises and reform openings. Ukraine, a frontline state in the post-Soviet democratic struggle, became a central recipient following the 2004 Orange Revolution and even more so after the 2014 Euromaidan uprising. U.S. aid has focused on anti-corruption, electoral reform, media freedom, and civil society, with an evident increase following the 2022 Russian invasion. Georgia likewise became a priority partner after the 2003 Rose Revolution, with assistance aimed at judiciary reform, party development, and local governance. However, recent backsliding and democratic stagnation have triggered re-evaluation of aid modalities in both countries.

Armenia and Moldova have received more modest and targeted assistance, often responsive to political developments. Armenia saw a surge in U.S. support following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, which emphasized democratic legitimacy and youth civic participation. Moldova, frequently described as a "swing state" between East and West, has experienced periodic boosts in aid during pro-European governments, particularly post-2019. In contrast, authoritarian environments in Belarus and Azerbaijan have benefitted from U.S. engagement largely limited to supporting independent media, human rights defenders, and civil society resilience. Despite these efforts, the entrenched nature of authoritarian rule in both countries has hindered meaningful democratic progress.

Scholars have offered varying assessments of U.S. democracy assistance in the EN. Thomas Carothers (1999) identified a persistent "democracy template" often insensitive to context, while Michael McFaul (2004) defended democracy promotion as a core national interest in post-communist Europe. More recent works, such as those by Poppe and Wolff (2017), critique the tendency of Western donors to impose technocratic solutions without sufficient attention to domestic legitimacy or political incentives. These debates highlight a key tension: while external support can empower reformers and build institutional capacity, it cannot substitute for local agency or overcome structural barriers without broader political buy-in.

The paper also situates U.S. assistance within strategic doctrines of sucessive administrations. The Bush administration's Freedom Agenda linked democracy promotion with counterterrorism and energy security, particularly in the Caspian region. The Obama administration initially pursued a "reset" with Russia, which deprioritized democracy in favour of pragmatic engagement, though later years saw renewed support for civil society following Russia's regional assertiveness. The Trump (first term) administration marked a period of inconsistency—characterized by rhetorical ambivalence toward democracy abroad—yet institutional momentum ensured continued programmatic support. Under the Biden administration, democracy has reemerged as a key strategic objective, tied to the global contest between liberal and authoritarian models. Support for Ukraine's sovereignty, Moldova's reform path, and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations have all featured prominently in recent U.S. policy. However, Trump's second term marked a profound shift: the U.S. began disengaging both from the Eastern Neighbourhood and from its global role as a democracy-promotion actor. This included the dismantling or significant curtailing of USAID and other foreign policy instruments tasked with supporting democracy and development abroad, signaling a retreat from the long-standing bipartisan consensus on democracy assistance.

Ultimately, this paper argues that while U.S. democracy assistance in the EN has achieved meaningful outcomes in selected cases—particularly where political conditions permitted reform—its overall impact has been uneven and context-dependent. Aid flows have tended to follow windows of opportunity, often reactive rather than strategic. This has led some analysts to call for more adaptive, locally informed, and long-term approaches to democracy support. The paper proceeds by outlining the strategic rationale behind U.S. involvement in the EN, examining aid patterns from 2009 to 2024, evaluating democratic trends using international indices, and concluding with reflections on how U.S. assistance can be made more effective in light of current and future challenges in the region.

2 Brief History of U.S. Relations with Eastern Neighbourhood Countries

The United States recognized the independence of all EN countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine - on December 25, 1991, when President George H.W. Bush announced the decision in an address to the nation regarding the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This was soon followed by the establishment of diplomatic relations with the newly independent countries and the opening of US Embassies in their respective capitals the following year. Among the six Eastern Partnership countries, the first US Embassy was opened in Kyiv, Ukraine on January 23, 1992 (Office of the Historian); followed by the establishment of the US Embassy in Minsk, Belarus on January 31, 1992 (Office of the Historian); in Chisinau, Moldova on March 13, of the same year (Office of the Historian); in Yerevan, Armenia on February 3, 1992 (Office of the Historian); in Baku, Azerbaijan on March 16, 1992 (Office of the Historian) and lastly, in Tbilisi, Georgia on April 23, 1992 (Office of the Historian).

Despite the nearly simultaneous establishment of diplomatic relations, the dynamics of the relationship between the partner countries have exhibited variation over the years. These dynamics have been influenced by several key factors, including mutual trust, the strategic significance of the countries to the United States, expressed aspirations to join Euro-Atlantic institutions, the partner country's stance towards Russia, and receptiveness to a strategic partnership with the United States. Additionally, the progress made towards establishing democratic institutions and upholding the rule of law has played a significant role in shaping these dynamics.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus experienced persistent conflict, notably in Georgia and between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. A Russian-brokered 1994 ceasefire eased tensions, but sporadic clashes continued, influencing regional energy projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Armenia, landlocked and surrounded by Georgia, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, has long struggled with territorial disputes and closed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Early in its independence, U.S. policy, shaped by the Armenian diaspora, initially favoured Armenia, exemplified by the 1992 Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act. However, as oil interests shifted U.S. focus, Azerbaijan gained more U.S. support. Armenia, with limited options, allied itself closely with Russia, relying on the 2002 Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and hosting Russian military bases. However, after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, during which Russia did not provide significant assistance, Armenia began to reconsider its dependence on Moscow. In 2018, Nikol Pashinyan came to power following peaceful protests against the ruling party. Pashinyan initially balanced relations with Russia and sought closer ties with the West. However, Armenia's lack of meaningful Western alliances and Azerbaijan's military partnerships with Turkey and Israel left Yerevan isolated. After the 2020 war, a Russian-brokered ceasefire saw Armenian territorial losses, and Russian peacekeepers were deployed. The U.S. increased engagement with Armenia, promoting dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, a September 2023 military offensive by Azerbaijan led to the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh, with over 100,000 Armenians fleeing the region. The U.S. condemned the offensive and provided $28 million in humanitarian aid since 2020. Armenia has since frozen its CSTO participation and increased cooperation with the EU and U.S., while Azerbaijan has resisted U.S.-mediated peace talks, citing bias. Armenia's shift away from Russia reflects a broader effort to diversify its international relationships amid changing regional dynamics. Despite broader disengagement from democracy promotion, Trump's second term did see limited diplomatic involvement in the South Caucasus. U.S. mediation contributed to facilitating the recent Armenia–Azerbaijan agreement, with Washington leveraging its bilateral ties to encourage compromise on humanitarian and security issues. While the initiative fell short of a comprehensive settlement, it nonetheless underscored the potential of American diplomacy to influence conflict dynamics in the region, even amid declining emphasis on broader democratic goals.

For more than a decade, Azerbaijan's energy reserves have been a key factor shaping U.S. policy toward the country, despite Azerbaijan's poor democratic record. U.S. support for Caspian energy helped solidify Azerbaijan's independence by providing economic stability and connecting it to Western markets (Bashirov, 2019). In the early 1990s, Azerbaijan did not receive U.S. aid due to the Armenian lobby's influence and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, 1992). However, the discovery of Caspian oil shifted U.S. policy. Under the Clinton Administration, exemptions were made to Section 907, and in 1997, President Heydar Aliyev signed investment deals with U.S. oil companies, further cementing strategic ties. Azerbaijan also joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 1995, and a U.S.-Azerbaijan Bilateral Security Treaty was signed in 1997. U.S. strategic interest in Azerbaijan's energy led to shifts in its position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, facilitating high-level talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan. While the U.S. began supporting democracy building in 1997, it prioritized energy and security over human rights, which was especially apparent during the G.W.Bush US presidency (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

Despite concerns about human rights violations and flawed elections, U.S. priorities remained focused on energy and security (Jamestown Foundation 2020). By 2007, U.S. interest in Azerbaijani energy had begun to decline due to increased domestic oil production and investments in clean energy alternatives (The American Interest 2019). President George W. Bush's 2008 criticism of Azerbaijan's press freedom signalled growing concerns over its democratic record (Jamestown Foundation 2020). When the Obama Administration took office in 2009, it shifted focus toward reducing energy dependence and promoting democracy. However, efforts to normalize Turkey-Armenia relations—which Azerbaijan opposed—failed, leading Azerbaijan to

cancel its NATO Partnership for Peace program and join the Non-Aligned Movement in 2011 (Jamestown Foundation 2020). During Obama's presidency, democracy and human rights became more prominent issues in U.S.-Azerbaijan relations, though by 2012 the U.S. had limited leverage. Under Trump, the focus on human rights diminished further, and tensions over these issues decreased (Jamestown Foundation 2020). U.S. involvement in the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan war over Nagorno-Karabakh was minimal, with Russia ultimately brokering a ceasefire (The American Interest 2019). . However, in 2022, U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Armenia, signalling support amid the ongoing conflict. In 2023, Azerbaijan's military action to retake Nagorno-Karabakh prompted U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to call for an end to hostilities, and several high-level U.S. visits to Azerbaijan were cancelled (France24, 2023). Relations between the two nations worsened further after President Biden declined to congratulate President Aliyev on his 2024 election victory, and the U.S. Embassy criticized the restrictive election environment (U.S. Embassy in Azerbaijan, 2024).

U.S. strategic interest in Belarus is tied to its proximity to NATO and EU members, despite Belarus being Russia's closest European ally. Relations have often been strained due to human rights violations under Lukashenka and his alignment with Russia. Since 1994, Lukashenka has suppressed Belarus's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, instead signing a 1997 treaty with Russia to strengthen ties in defence and security (Mrachek 2019). The U.S. criticized the 2001 Belarusian elections as unfair and deepened Belarus's isolation with the 2004 Belarus Democracy Act, targeting Lukashenka's regime with sanctions. Further sanctions followed the 2006 elections, and relations worsened in 2008 when Belarus expelled U.S. diplomats (Mrachek 2019). Despite brief improvements after Belarus released political prisoners and partly due to Belarus' refusal to fully align with Russia on certain issues, such as not recognizing Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 the U.S.-Belarus relations remained inconsistent. Though the Lukashenka's positive move was rather a tactical attempt to adopt temporarily a multi-vector approach towards the West and Russia, than a solidified policy vision (Shraibman 2021). A thaw occurred in 2019 with the appointment of a U.S. ambassador to Belarus and a visit by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. However, the 2020 Belarusian elections, marked by violent crackdowns on protests, led the U.S. to support opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. Military cooperation between Russia and Belarus then intensified, culminating in Belarus allowing Russia to use its territory for the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The U.S. cut ties with Minsk and imposed severe economic sanctions on Belarusian elites for their support of Russia's aggression against Ukraine (U.S. Department of State 2024).

For many years, Georgia was seen as a reliable U.S. ally in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, committed to Euro-Atlantic integration, a stance widely supported by the Georgian public. The U.S. interest in Georgia stemmed from geopolitical reasons, including containing Russia and Iran, ensuring a key transportation corridor bypassing both countries, and promoting democracy and human rights. Additionally, personal relationships, such as that of Georgia's former Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, helped solidify U.S. and NATO support (Gamkrelidze, 2021, 584). In the 1990s, Georgia, plagued by internal conflict and instability, became a U.S. strategic partner, participating in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline project, which sent a strong message to Russia about Georgia's independence (Gamkrelidze, 2021, 584). The Rose Revolution in 2003, which brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power, further strengthened U.S. ties, with President George W. Bush calling Georgia "a beacon of liberty" during his 2005 visit. Although NATO membership remained elusive after the 2008 Bucharest Summit, Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations persisted, even as Russia attacked the country later that year.

The 2008 war marked a turning point in U.S.-Russia relations. Despite the Obama Administration's "reset" in 2009, the conflict highlighted a deepening rift with Russia, as noted by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

(Gamkrelidze, 2021, 586). The U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership, signed in 2009, underscored America's continued support for Georgia despite efforts to improve U.S.-Russia relations. Vice President Joe Biden's visits in 2009 and 2012 reaffirmed U.S. commitments, and in 2008, NATO created the NATO-Georgia Commission to facilitate Georgia's path toward membership (NATO 2022). Despite concerns over Georgia's human rights record, cooperation with the U.S. continued, particularly after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine. Georgia's security became more important, and its ties with NATO deepened, with the first Georgia-NATO Commission meeting in 2016 (NATO 2016). However, relations began to decline in 2018 after the Georgian Dream party consolidated power. The 2020 elections were criticized by the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi for alleged voter intimidation and other irregularities (U.S. Embassy Tbilisi, 2020).

Tensions escalated in 2022 when Georgia did not align with U.S. policy on the Russia-Ukraine war. The Georgian government's response to criticism included conspiracy theories and personal attacks on U.S. and EU ambassadors, prompting the U.S. State Department to warn that this was not how partners should communicate (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The situation worsened with Georgia's passage of a "Kremlin-inspired" foreign influence law in 2023, which the U.S. Embassy condemned as a "dark day for Georgia's democracy" (U.S. Embassy in Georgia, 2023). Further strain came in 2023 when Georgia signed a strategic partnership agreement with China, drawing criticism from former U.S. diplomats. Georgian officials, including Prime Minister Kobakhidze, acknowledged the waning U.S. interest in Georgia, as demonstrated by the lack of high-level visits. Experts believe U.S.-Georgia relations are now at their lowest point since Georgia's independence (Voice of America, 2023).

Moldova, alongside Ukraine and Georgia, has long sought closer ties with the West, despite Russian interference and territorial disputes (Congressional Research Service 2023). Its strategic location between NATO and EU member state Romania, and Ukraine, has made it a focus of U.S. attention. Russia, meanwhile, has maintained a military presence in the breakaway region of Transnistria and leveraged energy dependence to keep Moldova within its sphere of influence (Woehrel 2014). Since Moldova's independence in 1991, its foreign policy has balanced East-West relations, reflecting fluctuating domestic opinion divided between Russia and the West (Cenusa 2020). Dominated by the Party of Communists throughout the 2000s, Moldova began a shift toward Europe after the 2009 elections. Pro-European parties formed the Alliance for European Integration, leading to Moldova signing an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014. However, internal political struggles and the rise of pro-Russian forces, such as the Socialist Party, created ongoing challenges. In 2020, pro-Western Maia Sandu won the presidency, and her Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) secured a parliamentary majority in 2021. This marked a turning point, ending years of unstable coalitions and fostering closer ties with the West (Congressional Research Service 2023). Under Sandu's leadership, Moldova made significant reforms and was granted EU candidate status alongside Ukraine in 2022. U.S.-Moldova relations have strengthened over time, particularly in areas like U.S. aid, economic cooperation, and support for Moldova's territorial integrity, including efforts to resolve the Transnistrian conflict (Turco et al., 2015). The re-invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 stalled progress on Transnistria, but the U.S. has increased defense and economic assistance to Moldova, with aid rising from $55 million annually in 2019 to over $285 million in 2022, and $300 million in 2023 (Congressional Research Service 2023). In response to destabilization efforts, the U.S. imposed sanctions on pro-Russian figures like the Shor Party and former politician Vladimir Plahotniuc in 2022 and 2023. The Biden administration's continued support for Moldova, including requests for additional aid in 2024, reflects a strong commitment to the country's security and democratic reforms.

From **Ukraine**'s early independence, U.S. policy has aligned with its national interests, often shaped by America's evolving relationship with Russia (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Ukraine, the largest successor to the

Soviet Union, holds a strategic geopolitical position between Russia and NATO. The U.S. viewed Ukraine's democratic development as a key influence on regional democracy (U.S. Department of State, 2004). The Biden-Harris administration's National Security Strategy highlights Ukraine's importance not just as a counterbalance to Russia, but also for European peace, global food supply and energy security. After Ukraine's 1991 independence, America's primary concern was its nuclear arsenal. Following the 1994 Trilateral Statement, Ukraine dismantled its nuclear weapons and joined the Generalized System of Preferences, gaining U.S. market access. The U.S. played a pivotal role in Ukraine signing the Budapest Memorandum (1994), aiming to prevent a resurgence of Russian imperialism (Welt, 2020). Ukraine became the first former Soviet republic to join NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1995. By 2000, U.S.-Ukraine relations soured due to scandals under President Leonid Kuchma, resulting in reduced U.S. aid. Despite tensions, U.S. interest in a democratic Ukraine persisted. The U.S. supported Ukraine's 2004 "Orange Revolution," which led to pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko's presidency. This resulted in intensified U.S.-Ukraine relations, with President George W. Bush endorsing Ukraine's NATO and EU aspirations (Rodriguez et al., 2016). In 2010, pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych became president. His 2013 refusal to sign an EU Association Agreement sparked protests, culminating in the 2014 "Revolution of Dignity" and his eventual ousting. Russia retaliated by annexing Crimea in early 2014, leading to U.S. sanctions and increased financial assistance to Ukraine. By 2014, U.S. aid totaled $184 million and a $1 billion loan guarantee. Despite peace talks, conflict in eastern Ukraine escalated, and the U.S. responded by authorising non-lethal military aid (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Under President Trump, U.S. military assistance, including lethal aid, increased. In 2019, comedian-turned-politician Volodymyr Zelensky became president, facing challenges from entrenched oligarchic interests. However, his leadership during Russia's February 2022 invasion solidified U.S. support, with President Biden committing $44.2 billion in security aid by 2024 (Congressional Research Service, 2024). Biden's 2023 visit to Kyiv underscored strong U.S. solidarity with Ukraine.

3 Overview of the U.S. Policy toward the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood

The two most recent U.S. National Security Strategies (2017 & 2022) by two different U.S. Administrations, refer to the geopolitical competition between the major Western powers and two main adversaries, one of which is Russia. Rivalry between the United States and Russia has a long history, long predating the period covered by this paper and is not a major topic of interest of the present study. However, global competition with Russia for (re)shaping the international order seems to determine U.S. policy towards the EU's eastern neighbourhood (EN) – the geopolitical space that happens to coincide with the states "in between" Russia and NATO. According to experts, these states are at the centre of this competition (Pezard 2022, 4). Meanwhile, it is important not to lose sight of the People's Republic of China (hereinafter "China"), U.S.'s second most influential rival, whose role has gradually been increasing at least in some of the EN countries.

The analysis provided in this chapter is primarily based on the U.S. National Security Strategies (NSS) of the Biden, Trump and Obama Administrations and in parallel, also examines U.S. strategic partnership formats with the EN countries.

3.1 U.S. National Security Strategies of the Obama Administration (2015 and 2010)

Unlike the 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) of the Obama Administration, which underestimated Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008 and focused on "resetting" relations with Moscow, the 2015 NSS, adopted after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, recognizes the growing threat from Russia. It addresses concerns about Russia's use of energy for political purposes and Europe's dependence on Russian resources, advocating for diversification of energy sources and routes (NSS 2015, p 5, 16). Under "Strengthen Our Enduring Alliance with Europe," the U.S. commits to supporting the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of Eastern European countries and strengthening ties with the Caucasus while promoting conflict resolution (NSS 2015). Unlike the 2010 version, the 2015 strategy emphasizes deterring Russian aggression through sanctions, regional presence, training, and energy security improvements. The U.S. also pledges support for partners like Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine to enhance their cooperation with NATO and improve their self-defence capabilities (NSS 2015, 25). The 2015 strategy marks a shift from the 2010 NSS, which aimed to build a cooperative relationship with Russia based on mutual interests while vaguely supporting the sovereignty of Russia's neighbours (NSS 2010, 44). Despite Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, the 2010 NSS sought to continue collaboration with Moscow in certain areas, as President Obama noted in a 2009 U.S.-Russia summit, stating that the two presidents "agreed to disagree" on Georgia. To reassure Ukraine and Georgia that the U.S.-Russia reset would not come at their expense, Washington signed Strategic Partnership Charters with Ukraine in December 2008 and Georgia in January 2009. Then-Vice President Biden visited both countries in 2009 and 2012 to reaffirm U.S. commitments. However, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 highlighted the failure of the reset, revealing Moscow's view of Europe's eastern neighbourhood as its strategic sphere of influence.

3.2 U.S. National Security Strategy of the Trump Administration (2017)

While the National Security Strategy of the Trump Administration puts America's domestic affairs first, it clearly recognizes the growing political, economic, and military competitions around the world, where Russia has already started redrawing internationally recognized borders. The document realizes the threat coming from Russia as it attempts "to erode American security and prosperity" (National Security Strategy 2017, 2) became very apparent. Under the regional European context, the Strategy mentions the invasion of the two eastern neighbourhood (EN) countries - *Georgia* and *Ukraine* by Russia (National Security Strategy 2017, 47). However, the Trump Administration assumes that this intention is not necessarily fixed and leaves a space for cooperation with Russia across areas of mutual interest (National Security Strategy 2017, 25). The document remains silent in relation to other EN countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus and Moldova, but makes reference to Russia's ambitions to establish spheres of influence "near its borders" (National Security Strategy 2017, 25); however, it does not offer any vision as to how to contain this threat.

3.3 U.S. National Security Strategy of the Biden-Harris Administration (2022)

The U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) of October 2022 highlights the need for American leadership amid strategic competition to shape the international order and defend democracy globally. The NSS identifies two major strategic challenges: global competition with major powers like China and Russia, which pursue authoritarian governance and revisionist foreign policies (NSS 2022, 8), and the shared global challenges of climate change, food insecurity, disease, terrorism, energy shortages, and inflation. The U.S. policy towards the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood falls under the first challenge, with Russia posing an immediate threat to international law and order by invading neighbours and attempting to redraw borders (NSS 2022, 8). China's economic, diplomatic, and technological power is also seen as a global supremacy threat. The U.S. pledges support for countries, regardless of size, to freely make decisions that serve their interests—relevant to all

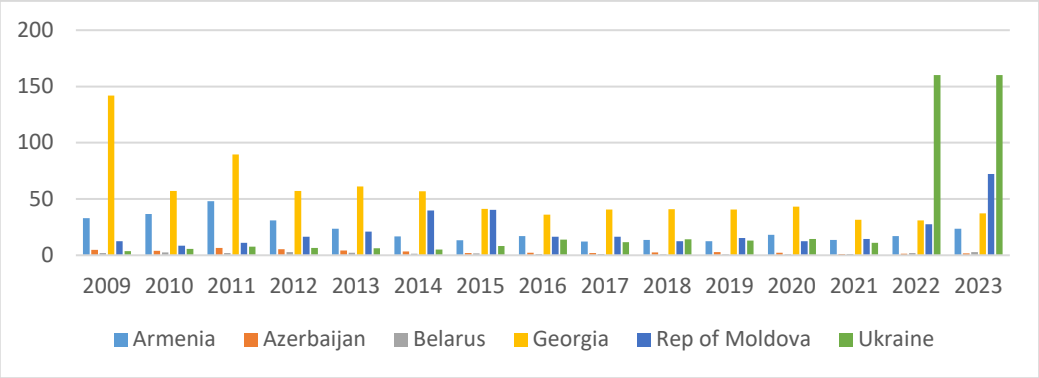
EN countries. Russia is deemed “an immediate and persistent threat” to international stability (NSS 2022, 25), and addressing this threat is a central focus (NSS 2022, 23). The U.S. promises continued support for Ukraine, economically and regionally, and reinforces its commitment to a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace, while imposing severe costs on Moscow (NSS 2022, p 26, 39). The NSS notes Russia’s past actions—Ukraine 2014, military intervention in Syria, and destabilization efforts through intelligence and cyber means—but omits a direct mention of Georgia, the first victim of Russia's full-scale invasion. While not explicitly mentioning Georgia and Moldova’s vulnerabilities, the NSS supports their European aspirations and institutional reforms (NSS 2022, 39). Belarus is briefly mentioned regarding human rights concerns. The document also addresses the South Caucasus, expressing U.S. interest in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Georgia’s unresolved issues. The earlier Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (March 2021) highlighted Russia's destabilizing influence but omitted reference to its immediate neighbours. However, it emphasized U.S. strategic interest in Europe and the Indo-Pacific (Interim NSSG, 8).

4 Volume, Priorities, and Instruments of U.S. democracy assistance to EUs Eastern Neighbours

Over the years, the objectives of US foreign assistance in state building and democracy promotion across Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have adapted to evolving challenges both domestically and globally. The US government consistently evaluates the progress made by host countries and recognizes the significance of host country demand and leadership in determining the effectiveness of development efforts. Strong host country interest and leadership in reform often influence the amount and objectives of assistance, while a lack of political will may limit the full potential of US programs. For instance, the US government's development partnership with Azerbaijan has evolved significantly over time, transitioning from early humanitarian aid to a collaborative approach involving joint planning and co-investment activities. In the case of Azerbaijan, US assistance aimed at promoting economic resilience and sustainable development, diversifying the economy beyond the oil sector, and enhancing the country’s regional transit potential and enabling the business environment (Baghirov 2019). In other instances, significant increases in US foreign assistance have occurred following notable democratic transitions. Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution led to a renewed partnership tailored to democratic reforms, while US Foreign Assistance to Ukraine experienced a substantial increase following Ukraine's 2014 Revolution of Dignity, Russia’s annexation of the Crimean peninsula and its military invasion of eastern Ukraine. Notably, assistance to Ukraine received another significant boost following the 2022 Russian aggression. Overall, the main focus of US development strategies and state assistance programs in the EN countries from 2010 to 2023 was centred on state building, democracy and boosting resilience against threats emerging from Russia and China. Russia was identified as the principal source of concern for the region. Programs implemented by the US included electoral framework reform, political party strengthening, raising awareness about electoral processes and civil liberties, and advocating for inclusive political and public policies. It is paramount to acknowledge the role played by the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS), comprising member organizations such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). These organizations pursue their objectives through rigorous public opinion research, strengthening the civil society sector, and facilitating training programs and other activities tailored to political parties. Before the recent U.S. disengagement from democracy promotion—marked by the downsizing and the scaling back of broader foreign assistance instruments, the priorities of USAID's local offices were diverse and included direct support for reforms necessary for democratic transformations and financing economic and social empowerment projects, such as women's economic empowerment, fostering gender equality, promotion of the private

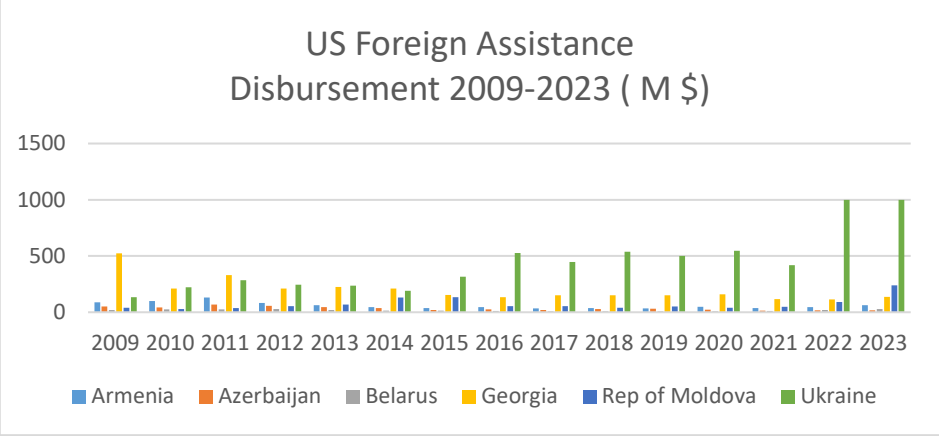
sector, etc. NED focused on strengthening civil society and raising public awareness on democratic transformations. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in cooperation with government institutions, aimed to alleviate poverty, strengthen and introduce good governance practices, and promote governmental transparency and accountability. Below we evaluate US government assistance programs in the EN countries, analyse US foreign assistance strategies, explore the objectives and the volume of assistance provided, and the specific approaches implemented to achieve those goals. We also assess the US government's efforts to support these countries' resistance against external influences seeking to undermine their democratic institutions.

Figure 1. US Foreign Assistance to the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood 2009-2023 (Per Capita)



Source: US Foreign Assistance by Country. https://foreignassistance.gov . Data last updated on 02/29.2024.[1]

Figure 2. US foreign assistance to the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood 2009-2023 (absolute numbers)



Source: US Foreign Assistance by Country. https://foreignassistance.gov . Data last updated on 02/29.2024.[2]

[1] Due to the Table's scale limits we have not specified USAID assistance to Ukraine per capita in 2022-2023. In 2022 Ukraine received 294,000 USD and in 2023 around 458,000 USD per capita through USAID programs support.

[2] Due to the Table's scale limits we have not specified US assistance to Ukraine in 2022-2023. In 2022 Ukraine received 11 b USD and in 2023 around 17 b USD through USAID programs support.

4.1 Armenia

Since 2009, the US has provided nearly $800 million in assistance to Armenia. From 2009 to 2012, this aid, developed with the Armenian government, focused on enhancing the private sector, improving the business environment, and strengthening infrastructure, with particular emphasis on rural areas where 45% of inhabitants are involved in agriculture. USAID also invested $14 million in good governance and civil society. The MCC initially allocated $235 million for Armenia (US State Department, 2006), aiming to reduce rural poverty through agriculture. However, "concerns over democratic governance" led to a reduction in funding to approximately $177 million, with the World Bank covering continued road projects (Millennium Challenge Corporation, 2013). USAID initiatives from 2009-2012 included the Armenian Local Government Program, Pension Reform Project, and Competitive Armenian Private Sector (CAPS) project, focusing on IT, computer engineering, pharmaceuticals, and tourism. The American Bar Association's ABA ROLI program continued to promote rule of law (ABA, 2021). In 2013, the US launched a new Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) for 2013-2017, targeting inclusive economic growth and improved trade and investment environments (CDCS, 2012). The goal was for Armenia to be recognized as a top reforming country by the World Bank, with enhanced democratic governance and reduced corruption (CDCS, 2012). The strategy also shifted focus to local governance (CDCS,2012) and civil society support, with $10 million allocated to these areas. Media and civil society would become more independent and sustainable, and poverty, malnutrition and the spread of communicable diseases would be reduced (CDCS,2013). The 2018 Velvet Revolution led to increased US support for democratic and economic development. The 2020-2025 CDCS highlighted Armenia's progress with historic elections and government reforms. The strategy emphasized anti-corruption efforts, media independence, and civil society capacity. Notable programs include the Strengthening Electoral Processes and Political Accountability initiative (2019), which received $14 million from 2020 to 2023, and the Armenia Rule of Law/Justice Sector Support Projects (2023-2027), focusing on court administration and case management. The Integrity Project (2022-2026) aims to combat corruption and enhance governance. Overall, following the 2018 revolution, USAID assistance in Armenia increased, emphasizing democratic institutions, media freedom, and rule of law. (Table 3)

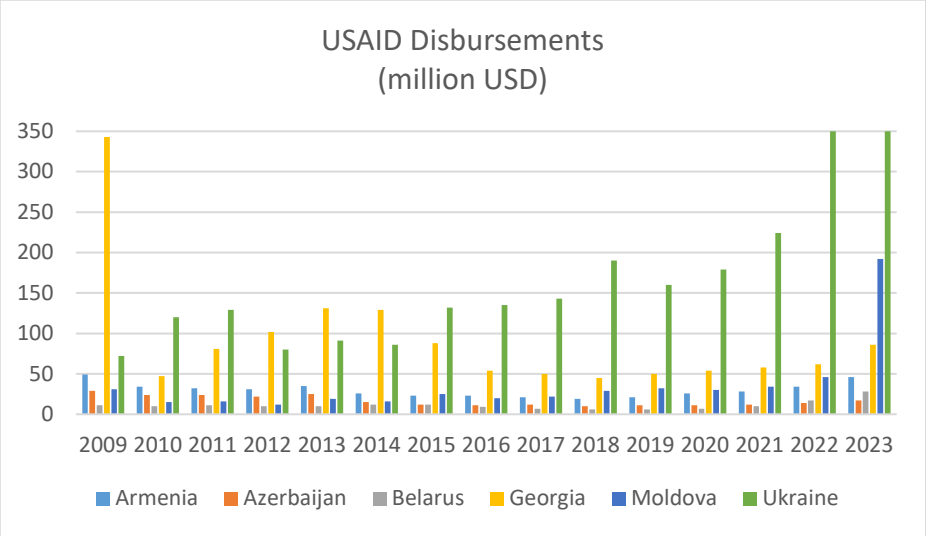
4.2 Azerbaijan

US development assistance to Azerbaijan has evolved from early humanitarian aid in the 1990s to a partnership focused on long-term goals (CDCS, 2010). From 2009 to 2023, the US provided approximately $0.5 billion in aid (ForeignAssitance.gov., 2024). The USAID Country Development Cooperation Strategy (2011-2020) targeted reforms including improving the investment climate, fostering democratic participation, and enhancing healthcare, social assistance, and gender equality. USAID allocated $200 million to Azerbaijan from 2010 to 2023, focusing on competitiveness, trade, financial sector improvements, and primary healthcare. Annual allocations ranged from $3 to $5 million for civil society and government programs. Key initiatives included the Women's Participation Program (WPP), LEAP projects, and efforts to support independent media and entrepreneurship. In 2011, at the peak of U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan, the country received USD 79 million in aid, with more than half allocated to security-related programs, including military training, threat reduction, and equipment provision. By 2020, the reduced assistance—amounting to USD 32 million—was largely directed toward peacebuilding initiatives. A smaller portion, amounting to just a few million dollars, was dedicated to improving governance and supporting civil society (Nahmadova, 2022), though this support would all but disappear in subsequent years. Between 2017 and 2019, USAID expanded its programs to include the Rule of Law program, Legislative Function and Processes program, and Azerbaijan New Media Project. The New Line Institute argues that with a view to reducing the incentives for the confrontation between Azerbaijan and Armenia, U.S. objectives included promoting democratic

reforms and anti-corruption measures to enhance domestic institutions and align these nations more closely with Western frameworks (Yalowitz, Kenneth, and Stronski, 2021). On the other hand,, a study by the Baku Research Institute (Nahmadova, 2022) suggests that U.S. aid primarily targeted energy security and counterterrorism, potentially overlooking the socio-economic stability risks associated with Azerbaijan's dependence on oil revenue. Additionally, healthcare reforms showed limited progress, with infant mortality rates higher than neighbouring countries.

It is worth mentioning that U.S.-funded organizations have encountered significant challenges operating in Azerbaijan, particularly since the early 2010s (Khadija Ismayilova, 2011). The Azerbaijani government has implemented measures that have hindered the activities of these organizations, often citing legal and regulatory justifications. Having noted this intolerance to the "foreign influence" the US has almost abandoned attempts to support CS. The 2020-2025 Country Development Cooperation Strategy noted the Azerbaijani government's cautious stance towards US civil society involvement due to concerns about destabilisation. Until its closure in Azerbaijan on July 2024—initiated by the Azerbaijani government as a response to USAID's alleged interference in domestic affairs and pursuing an agenda inconsistent with Azerbaijan's national interests (Hasanova 2025), the US foreign assistance planned to build trust through dialogue and strategic support. Despite challenges, USAID remained committed to supporting civil society, media, and human rights in Azerbaijan, recognizing their importance for the country's development and self-reliance (CDCS, 2020-2027). The strategy also recognized Azerbaijan's petroleum revenue and aims to diversify the economy. USAID collaborated with agencies like the Small and Medium Business Development Agency and Agrarian Services Agency to promote economic engagement, especially among women and rural communities. In 2023, USAID initiated a program focusing on European Neighbourhood Policy grants. It has also responded to official requests for technical assistance from key Azerbaijani institutions, including the Central Bank and Ministry of Justice, to support reform efforts and enhance governance.

Figure 3. USAID disbursement figures: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine



Data retrieved from ForeignAssistance.gov : https://www.foreignassistance.gov [3]

[3] Due to the Table's scale limits we have not specified USAID assistance to Ukraine in 2022-2023. In 2022 Ukraine received 9 b USD and in 2023 around 16 b USD through USAID programs support.

4.3 Belarus

From 2009 to 2023, the US provided $250 million in support to Belarus (ForeignAssistance.gov, 2024). Nearly 47% of this funding was allocated to strengthening governance and civil society, 9% to businesses and social services, and the rest to conflict aftermath, education, and healthcare (ForeignAssistance.gov, 2024). This support prioritized democracy and state-building, but the current authoritarian regime and its role as a key ally of Russia since 2022, along with developments following the 2020 presidential elections, have restricted Western assistance. US organizations face severe restrictions in Belarus, where cooperating with them can lead to legal penalties. The US State Department's goal is to support democratic processes through civil society and media, focusing on promoting democratic principles, human rights, and supporting independent media and civil society organizations (U.S. State Department, 2024). However, the operations of US organizations like NDI, IRI, and IFES significantly decreased after the 2020 elections, and USAID closed its office in Belarus in 2021 (USAID in Belarus, 2024). Despite these challenges, NDI, IRI, and IFES continue to support democracy remotely by conducting public opinion polls and empowering pro-democracy groups (IRI in Belarus, 2024). The Millennium Challenge Corporation and Open Government Partnership initiatives are not operational in Belarus, and NED supports internally displaced persons working remotely to promote democracy.

Following the 2020 elections and subsequent repressions, democratic processes in Belarus have been severely diminished, despite US efforts since 1992 to strengthen state institutions and promote democracy, including public opinion polls, women and youth empowerment, political party strengthening, and market economy support (U.S. State Department, 2024).

4.4 Georgia

From 2009 to 2023, the US provided approximately $3 billion in assistance to Georgia, part of a total of around $6 billion over three decades (ForeignAssistance.gov., 2024). Initial aid focused on infrastructure post-2008 war with Russia, later shifting to support democratic institutions and elections. This shift helped ensure peaceful power transitions and strengthen Georgia's governance, civil society, and rule of law. The US-Georgia Partnership Charter, effective since 2009, emphasizes resolving the Russia-Georgia conflict and advocates for the withdrawal of Russian forces as per the August 2008 ceasefire agreement. The charter guides US assistance, focusing on democracy, defence, economic issues, and cultural exchanges.

Following the 2008 war, the US provided $62 million in humanitarian aid and $1 billion in comprehensive support to address the economic impact of the war (CDCS Georgia, 2012). USAID allocated $334 million in 2009 for emergency response, with an additional $66 million from the State Department for refugee and conflict victim support, in collaboration with UN organizations (Foreignassistance.gov. Georgia, 2024). The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact from 2006-2011 and its 2008 amendment added up to $100 million for road and infrastructure repairs. The Georgia II Compact (2011-2019) invested $140 million in education to stimulate economic growth. USAID disbursed nearly $1.5 billion from 2009-2023, focusing on democratic governance. Support increased from $12 million to $30 million annually between 2010 and 2012, further expanding from 2013-2017 to enhance democratic institutions in anticipation of the 2016 and 2020 elections (CDCS Georgia, 2012). Key programs included The Good Governance, Public Policy Discourse, and Strengthening Political Parties. Partners like NDI, IRI, and NED worked on political party strengthening, legislative effectiveness, and election oversight. Judicial independence efforts included the 2007-2011 Judicial Administrative and Management Reform (JAMR), and programs such as the Georgian Rule of Law program and Judicial Independence and Legal Empowerment Project (JILEP). The Promoting Rule of Law in

Georgia program, supported by the East-West Management Institute/Georgia, continues until 2026. The 2020-2025 Country Development Cooperation Strategy supports Georgia's EU and NATO integration, focusing on resilience against malign influences, consolidation of democratic gains, and high-value employment opportunities. Despite these efforts, concerns remain about Georgia's commitment to democracy due to the fragility of reforms and external pressures from Russia. Recently the US government started a process of the revision of assistance to Georgia due to democratic backsliding. Important projects, including direct budgetary support were frozen, proving that the US assistance to countries of the region is conditional on democratic commitment.

4.5 Moldova

From 2009 to 2023, the US provided Moldova with approximately $1.1 billion in assistance. This aid focused on combating corruption, strengthening civil society, promoting political pluralism, and fostering media freedom. Economic support constituted nearly $500 million (38%), with $378 million allocated to democratic institutions and state-building efforts (31%), and over $373 million for other forms of assistance (Foreignassistance.gov. Moldova, 2024). The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) supported Moldova through the Threshold Program starting in 2006, providing $13.8 million for anti-corruption reforms by 2009. From 2010 to 2015, MCC's five-year, $259 million compact invested in agriculture, road infrastructure, and education.

According to the Moldovan CDCS 2013-2020, key areas for development included economic growth, trade, democracy, human rights, and governance. The US State Department highlights that assistance aims to strengthen Moldova's democratic institutions, foster economic growth, advance judicial reform, and support Moldova's Western trajectory (U.S. State Department, Moldova, 2024). Despite political turbulence, including a significant corruption scandal involving a pro-Western administration (Transparency International, 2022), Moldova recently established a pro-European government led by Maia Sandu. USAID's strategy for 2020-2027 focuses on democratic institution building, economic growth, transparency, and European integration.

In 2023, US assistance to Moldova increased significantly to nearly $242 million, including $110 million for the Moldova Development Policy Program to address the impacts of the Ukraine war, such as reimbursing verified electricity purchases (ForeignAssistance.gov. Moldova, 2024). USAID continued to support economic reform, private sector development, education, health, and electoral and legislative reforms with NDI, IRI, and IFES (NDI, IRI, NED, and IFES Offices in Moldova, 2024 to help Moldova address the economic, energy, security, and humanitarian impacts of the war against Ukraine. The USAID Moldova strategy for 2020-2027 aims to bolster democratic institutions, foster economic growth, and increase transparency and accountability, integrate Moldova with Europe, and support efforts for its association and eventual European Union membership Programs prioritize citizen engagement, combatting corruption, ensuring gender equality, and the strategic transition towards strengthening Moldova's own capacity to address development challenges and shift from donor-recipient towards partner-partner model of cooperation in the relations with US (CDCS 2020-2027. Moldova 2020).

4.6 Ukraine

Since 2009, the US has directed significant aid to Ukraine, focusing on participatory governance, economic development, health, and European integration (CDCS Ukraine, 2019). Prior to 2014, US assistance emphasized democratic governance and economic stability. However, Russia's aggression in 2014 shifted US support towards countering Russian influence, aiming to bolster Ukraine's democracy and resilience. USAID

established multiple objectives for Ukraine after the 2014 Russian invasion and occupation of the Donbas and Russia's annexation of Crimea, with the primary goals to support Ukraine united around core European values; reduce corruption in target sectors; mitigate the impact of Russia's aggression, strengthen democratic governance and support for inclusive, sustainable, market-driven economic growth (CDCS Ukraine, 2019-2024).

From 2009 to 2021, US aid to Ukraine totalled $4.6 billion, [4] with efforts concentrating on democracy promotion, anti-corruption, and developing a diverse political and economic landscape. Following the Russian invasion in 2022, Ukraine became the largest recipient of US aid globally. The total US assistance from 2009 to 2023 exceeded $32 billion, with over $28 billion disbursed between 2022 and 2023 alone (ForeignAssistance.gov. 2024) (NDI, IRI, IFES, OGP, NED, Millennium Challenge Corporation offices in Ukraine, 2024).

The 2022 escalation significantly increased direct financial aid to support state institutions and civil society, with 69% of the aid focused on these areas. The National Security Strategy (2022) underscores the strategic goal of making Russia's war in Ukraine a failure. USAID's role has been pivotal, funding Ukraine's economy, energy sector, healthcare, and education. Despite the ongoing conflict, USAID, along with IFES, NDI, and IRI, continues to support electoral reforms, political pluralism, and civil society. Additionally, OGP aids in maintaining functional state institutions (US National Security Strategy, 2022: 26).:

4.7 Model assistance to EN

It is also interesting to look for the distribution of U.S. democracy assistance across six conceptual models of democracy promotion, described by Freyburg et al (2024), used in EU's Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) region: **participatory**, **liberal**, **electoral**, **egalitarian**, **peacebuilding**, and **feminist**. Each model reflects a different approach to supporting democratic development. For example, **participatory** focuses on civil society and local governance, **liberal** emphasizes rule of law and human rights, **electoral** targets election processes and party systems, **egalitarian** promotes social equity and access to services, **peacebuilding** focuses on conflict prevention and reconciliation, and **feminist** addresses gender equality and women's empowerment. Between 2005 and 2022, U.S. assistance was dominated by the **participatory model**, which received **$68 million** (48.9%). The largest share was allocated in 2020 ($16.39 million), mostly to decentralization and civil society in Ukraine. A major earlier spike occurred in 2006, with $12 million for civil society in Azerbaijan. The **liberal model** received **$33.6 million**, with a 2014 peak of $4.17 million for legal and judicial reform and human rights across most EN countries. Another increase followed in 2022, mainly for Ukraine. The **electoral model** attracted **$15.47 million**, with a 2015 peak of $2.89 million for projects in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Belarus, focused on legislatures and political parties. No funding was given under this model in 2005, 2006, 2021, or 2022. The **egalitarian model** received **$11.36 million**, with major allocations in 2010 and 2006 for social services in Georgia and Moldova. The **peacebuilding model** totalled **$9.7 million**, with the highest funding in 2020 for conflict prevention in Ukraine. It was not funded in several years. Lastly, the **feminist model** received just **$917,890**, supporting small gender-related projects in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. The data is organized in a more structured form in the table below for ease of comparison.

Figure 4. Distribution of U.S. democracy assistance across six conceptual models of democracy promotion used in EU's Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) region. (2005-2022)

Model	Total Funding (USD Million)	% of Total	Peak Year(s)	Highest Annual Allocation (USD Million)	Key Countries / Notes
Participatory	68	48.9%	2020, 2006	16.39 (2020)	2020: Ukraine (decentralization, civil society); 2006: Azerbaijan (civil society)
Liberal	33.6	24.2%	2014, 2022	4.17 (2014)	2014: Legal/judicial reforms, HR in EN region; 2022: Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia
Electoral	15.47	11.1%	2015	2.89 (2015)	2015: Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Belarus (legislatures, parties); No funding in 2005, 2006, 2021–22
Egalitarian	11.36	8.2%	2010, 2006	2.48 (2010)	2010: Georgia (social services); 2006: Moldova (vulnerable groups); No funding in 2009, 2011, 2019, 2021
Peacebuilding	9.7	7.0%	2020	3.77 (2020)	2020: Ukraine (conflict prevention); No funding in 2008–12, 2014, 2019
Feminist	0.917	1%	—	Small annual amounts	Gender equality projects in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova; across three years only

Ukraine has consistently received high levels of assistance even **before** 2014, suggesting the U.S. prioritized structural democratic support independently of war-time urgency. Assistance increased in 2020, reflecting targeted support amidst active conflict and reform momentum. Ukraine's strong participatory and peacebuilding funding profile reflects both its geopolitical centrality and the U.S. strategy of bolstering bottom-up reforms amid external aggression. U.S. assistance to Georgia has been **less stable** over time. The support is **more diversified across models** than in Ukraine, suggesting U.S. interest in fostering multiple democratic dimensions, but without long-term continuity. Azerbaijan's profile is shaped by a **one-time spike** in 2006. U.S. assistance afterward has been **modest and irregular**, focused on **civil society** and **liberal reforms** under a constrained authoritarian context. Moldova received **targeted funding** aimed at **local governance (participatory model)**, particularly in recent years. Support is lower in total than for the three leading countries but more concentrated in **administrative capacity-building** than in political reform. Armenia's U.S. assistance is modest and **narrowly focused** on participatory governance, particularly decentralization. The decline in funding may reflect either perceived stagnation in democratic reforms or shifting U.S. priorities. U.S. support to Belarus has been focused mainly on **civil society resilience**, likely under the **liberal or participatory models**, with shrinking space for intervention due to regime repression, restrictive legal frameworks, and persistent state hostility toward external assistance.

Since the beginning of 2025, U.S. assistance strategy toward the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood has shifted further away from traditional democracy promotion and multilateral engagement. **Donald Trumps foreign policy** has seen a more openly transactional and geopolitically selective approach. Assistance is now primarily framed through the lens of national interest, great power competition, and burden-sharing expectations with European partners. Support for Ukraine has remained substantial due to its central role in resisting Russian aggression, but U.S. messaging increasingly emphasizes "self-reliance" and expects European actors to take the lead in long-term reconstruction and governance reform. U.S. aid has become more securitized, with

growing investment in defence cooperation, counter-disinformation, and border control rather than participatory governance or civil society development. Other countries in the region—such as Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, and Belarus—have seen more selective or even declining engagement. Assistance is largely limited to areas with clear strategic or economic benefit to the U.S., while normative democracy-building has been deprioritized. Coordination with the EU has also weakened, with Washington often pursuing parallel or bilateral tracks rather than integrated regional strategies. Trump's second term marks a decisive move toward a realist, interest-based assistance strategy in the Eastern Neighbourhood—one that supports stability and containment over liberal democratic transformation. The long-term implications for reform trajectories of U.S. cooperation with EN countries remain uncertain.

5 Brief description of the Democratic Record of the Eastern Partnership Countries

Between 2012 and 2022, the democratic trajectories of the EN countries have shown stark divergence. Freedom House data indicates that while **Armenia**, **Georgia**, **Moldova**, and **Ukraine** have consistently been classified as "partly free," **Azerbaijan** and **Belarus** remain "not free" (Freedom House on Armenia 2024; Freedom House on Azerbaijan 2024; Freedom House on Belarus 2024). Armenia demonstrated significant democratic progress following its 2018 political transformation, with its Freedom House score rising from 42 in 2013 to 51 in 2019. According to Freedom House, this improvement correlates with active government efforts to address systemic corruption and reform institutional frameworks (Freedom House on Armenia 2024). Conversely, Azerbaijan's democratic environment has continued to deteriorate. The nation has experienced a continuous decline in civil liberties and political rights, culminating in the 2023 seizure of Nagorno-Karabakh and the forced displacement of its Armenian population (Freedom House on Azerbaijan 2024). Belarus remains an authoritarian state with no meaningful political competition or civil liberties, a conclusion reinforced by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, which notes that since May 2020, Belarus has systematically dismantled independent civic space (High Commissioner for Human Rights 2024, 2, 4). Georgia, once a regional leader in democratic reforms, has experienced backsliding in recent years. Its Freedom House score fell from 64 in 2017–2018 to 58 in 2024, attributed to oligarchic influence and pressure on independent media (Freedom House on Georgia 2024). Moldova, under pro-Western leadership since 2020, has shown positive movement, rising from a score of 58 in 2019 to 62 in 2022, though persistent corruption and ties between political elites and economic interests continue to hinder deeper democratic consolidation (Freedom House on Moldova 2024). Ukraine, severely affected by Russia's full-scale invasion, has seen its democratic indicators fall sharply from 61 in 2022 to 49 in 2024, as wartime conditions forced the suspension of elections and media restrictions (Freedom House on Ukraine 2024). The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project corroborates these trends (as of 2024). Georgia and Armenia are categorized as "electoral democracies,"[5] though Armenia showed signs of autocratization in 2023 (Varieties of Democracy 2024, 14). Moldova is similarly classified but "could also belong" to the category of liberal democracies (Varieties of Democracy 2024, 42). Ukraine's regression into "electoral autocracy" is directly linked to the consequences of Russia's invasion, with one-third of its territory under occupation (Varieties of Democracy 2024, 21). Azerbaijan and Belarus remain entrenched in electoral autocracies, with Belarus further sliding toward authoritarianism (Varieties of Democracy 2024, 17). The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index reinforces these patterns. Azerbaijan and Belarus consistently rank as authoritarian regimes, while

[5] V-Dem Democracy Report 2025 lowered Georgia's status to the Electoral Autocracy. see: V https://www.v-dem.net/documents/54/v-dem_dr_2025_lowres_v1.pdf

Georgia retains hybrid regime status. Armenia experienced a dramatic shift in 2018, moving from authoritarianism toward democracy, only to encounter renewed challenges (The Economist, Democracy Index 2018, 18; Democracy Index 2019, 17). Moldova, meanwhile, transitioned from a hybrid regime to a flawed democracy in 2021 (Economist Intelligence, Democracy Index 2021, 7), although war-related instability in the region has impeded consistent progress. Ukraine's democracy index declined in 2022 and 2023, reflecting the impact of martial law and curbs on freedoms (Economist Intelligence, Democracy Index 2022, 54). Armenia's post-war domestic challenges and Azerbaijan's 2023 consolidation of power over Nagorno-Karabakh further solidified authoritarian rule in Baku.

6 What has been the impact of U.S. assistance in the European Union's Eastern Neighbourhood

The impact of U.S. foreign assistance on democratization in the six EN countries—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—since 2000 has been a subject of considerable academic debate. While the overarching effect remains inconclusive, studies such as Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, and Seligson (2007), suggest that U.S. assistance has positively influenced democratic development when measured over time and targeted strategically. However, other scholars, including Bosin (2012) and more recently - Smolnik (2020) argue that the outcomes have largely fallen below expectations. Freytag and Heckelman (2012) further nuance this debate by emphasizing that while there is no universal positive effect, there are identifiable "pockets of impact," particularly in areas like civil society, electoral reforms, and judicial independence.

The case of **Georgia** provides one of the most compelling examples of targeted impact. Following the Rose Revolution in 2003, U.S. support for civil society organizations (CSOs) and electoral reforms helped solidify democratic gains. According to USAID and corroborated by independent assessments (Mitchell, 2009), U.S. funding played a key role in supporting the media environment, judicial reforms, and anti-corruption measures. Despite recent backsliding, notably due to oligarchic influences and media intimidation (Freedom House 2024), the legacy of robust civil society and institutional frameworks built during the last two decades still endures, demonstrating the lasting influence of sustained, targeted assistance. In **Armenia**, the 2018 Velvet Revolution marked another instance where U.S. assistance contributed to democratic progress. While Bosin (2012) emphasizes that broad democratization outcomes are often underwhelming, Armenia's case highlights the potential of focused support for electoral integrity and youth civic engagement. USAID's long-term investments in election monitoring and capacity-building for civic groups were instrumental in the peaceful transfer of power (Ishkanian, 2015). Armenia's score improvements in Freedom House indices following the revolution further support this claim (Freedom House on Armenia 2024). **Moldova** presents a more mixed picture. Although Moldova has demonstrated gradual democratic improvement, culminating in its upgrade to a flawed democracy in the Economist Democracy Index in 2021, and later V-DEM Index 2024 (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025) the impact of U.S. assistance has been uneven. According to Freytag and Heckelman (2012), while support for judicial reforms and anti-corruption efforts showed promise, persistent issues with state capture and political interference have limited broader democratization. Indeed, despite of these volatilities in the past, US increased support to Moldova since 2019 and especially since 2022 could have an effect on increasing pro-western sentiments among population and in successful acceleration of democratic reforms. **In Ukraine**, U.S. assistance has undeniably played a role in supporting civil society, especially in the aftermath of the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution. Numerous independent analyses (Pop-Eleches and Way, 2016) highlight how U.S. funding helped bolster CSOs that were pivotal in mobilizing public protests and demanding government accountability. Nevertheless, the ongoing war has constrained

democratic consolidation, demonstrating the limits of external assistance in the face of structural and geopolitical challenges. **Azerbaijan** and **Belarus** illustrate the limitations of U.S. foreign assistance in highly autocratic contexts. According to Bosin (2012), the deeply entrenched authoritarian regimes in these countries have largely neutralized the impact of external democratization efforts. In Belarus, while U.S. assistance has supported underground media and exiled opposition groups, the regime's repressive apparatus has consistently outmatched these efforts (Freedom House on Belarus 2024). Similarly, in Azerbaijan, despite targeted programs aimed at strengthening media and civil society, the government's systematic crackdown on dissent has nullified these gains (Freedom House on Azerbaijan 2024. Both countries have seen limited progress in democratic reforms, with persistent issues such as restricted civil liberties and centralized power. This stagnation highlights the resilience of autocratic regimes and the challenges external actors face in promoting democracy within such contexts.

The inconclusive nature of the debate about efficiency of the foreign assistance aligns with Freytag and Heckelman's (2012) observation that democratization is context-specific, and foreign assistance can only be effective when domestic conditions are conducive. U.S. assistance has been most effective in countries with semi-open political systems where civil society and political opposition have room to operate, such as Georgia and Armenia. Indeed, later closer to 2020 Ukraine and Moldova have become even more open to the civil society engagement. Conversely, in deeply authoritarian contexts, the impact remains negligible.

In recent years, U.S. foreign assistance has continued to support democratization in EN countries, with mixed outcomes. Assistance in areas such as civil society, electoral reforms, and judicial independence has yielded tangible results in countries like Ukraine and Moldova. As mentioned above U.S. support strengthened civil society organizations (CSOs) in mobilizing protests and pushing for government accountability. Similarly, U.S. assistance helped Moldova conduct relatively free and fair parliamentary elections in 2019 (Freedom House 2024). However, while targeted assistance has led to some positive outcomes, these gains have not always been durable. In Georgia, for example, U.S. support post-Rose Revolution helped build democratic institutions, but recent signs of authoritarian backsliding, including media restrictions and judicial independence concerns, underscore the fragility of these gains (Freedom House 2024). Oligarchic influence and politically motivated legal actions in Georgia reveal the limits of external assistance in stabilizing democratic institutions (USAID 2020).

The experiences of Armenia and Azerbaijan further illustrate the complexities of foreign assistance in autocratic contexts. U.S. assistance in Armenia has been more focused, supporting electoral integrity and youth engagement, particularly following the 2018 Velvet Revolution. These efforts have contributed to significant democratic improvements (Ishkanian 2015). In Azerbaijan, however, the authoritarian regime has effectively neutralized many of these external efforts, leading to limited democratic reforms despite U.S. support for civil society and media development (Bosin 2012). In Belarus, U.S. foreign assistance has been less effective due to the regime's repressive nature. While support for underground media and exiled opposition groups has been provided, the regime's heavy-handed response has undermined these efforts (Freedom House 2024). The violent suppression of protests following the 2020 presidential election further highlighted the challenges of democratization in Belarus despite years of U.S. assistance (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2025).

While U.S. assistance has made measurable contributions to democratization in certain EN countries, its effectiveness remains contingent on local political realities. The recent authoritarian tendencies in Georgia underscore the limits of external support in ensuring long-term democratic stability. Future strategies should focus on strengthening civil society resilience, supporting independent media, and promoting judicial

reforms, while adapting assistance to the unique political contexts of each country (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2025).

U.S. foreign assistance has shown both positive and limited effects on democratization in Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) countries. While there is no universal success story, targeted efforts in specific areas, such as civil society support, electoral integrity, and judicial reform, have yielded measurable progress, particularly in Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, and Ukraine. For example, in Georgia, U.S. assistance following the Rose Revolution contributed significantly to civil society development and electoral reforms, though recent democratic backsliding and increasing oligarchic influence suggest that these gains remain fragile. Armenia's Velvet Revolution also benefited from U.S. support, with targeted assistance for electoral integrity and youth engagement playing a key role in the peaceful transfer of power. Despite these successes, the ongoing challenges in Belarus and Azerbaijan reveal the limitations of external aid in deeply autocratic contexts where political repression stifles meaningful change. Furthermore, the case of Georgia, where signs of authoritarianism have emerged once again, highlights the vulnerability of democratic institutions, even after significant foreign investment. The broader lesson is that external assistance, while useful in fostering democratic progress, is not a panacea for long-term stability. In Ukraine and Moldova, U.S. support has contributed to strengthening civil society and advancing electoral reforms, but these countries face ongoing struggles, especially due to the geopolitical and security challenges they encounter.

7 Conclusions

Since the late 2000s, the **United States has been a consistent provider of assistance** to the six Eastern Neighborhood countries, focusing on democratic governance, state-building, economic reform, and security. While common priorities exist, aid has been highly context-specific, tailored to each country's political conditions, reform potential, and development needs. In economic terms, U.S. support has promoted private sector growth, market reforms, and investment climate improvements. Country strategies have emphasized different areas—agriculture in Armenia and Moldova, energy in Azerbaijan, and infrastructure in Georgia—while also advancing cross-cutting issues such as women's empowerment, gender equality, and rural development.

Democratic governance and civil society engagement have been central pillars. U.S. programs have aimed to strengthen the rule of law, counter corruption, support media freedom, and protect human rights. Assistance has funded electoral reform, civic participation, judicial independence, and investigative journalism. Organizations such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) have trained civil society groups and political actors, contributing to greater pluralism. Security assistance has also remained prominent, particularly in Ukraine and Georgia, where U.S. support has helped build resilience against Russian aggression and preserve sovereignty.

The effectiveness of U.S. assistance has varied considerably across the region. Ukraine has received the most substantial and sustained support, especially after the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution and the 2022 Russian invasion. Aid has strengthened civil society and governance, though the war continues to constrain institutional consolidation. Georgia benefited significantly from U.S. engagement after the Rose Revolution, with visible gains in judicial reform and media freedom, but recent democratic backsliding has reduced the scope of support. Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution marked another high point for U.S. democracy assistance, which facilitated electoral integrity and youth mobilization, though democratic consolidation remains fragile. Moldova's trajectory has been uneven: while U.S. aid has advanced anti-corruption and

judicial reforms, entrenched state capture continues to limit progress, despite renewed momentum since 2019.

In contrast, **the impact has been minimal in entrenched authoritarian systems**. In Belarus, repressive state control has blocked institutional reform, limiting U.S. engagement to civil society resilience and independent media. Azerbaijan has similarly constrained U.S. influence, with government resistance forcing the closure of USAID in 2024 and restricting democracy support to modest initiatives in civil society and economic diversification. These cases underscore the limits of external democracy promotion where regimes actively resist it.

Overall, U.S. assistance reflects a differentiated strategic approach shaped by regime type, domestic reform capacity, and geopolitical context. It has been most effective in semi-open systems where public demand for democratization and Euro-Atlantic integration is strong—such as Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova. In these cases, U.S. programs contributed to electoral reforms, civil society activism, and institutional strengthening, though gains have often proven reversible. In closed systems like Belarus and Azerbaijan, impact has been limited but not absent, as support for civil society may lay the foundation for future openings.

The **long-term record demonstrates both achievements and constraints**. Democratic gains in Georgia and Armenia after their respective revolutions, or in Ukraine following Euromaidan, highlight the catalytic role of U.S. aid when aligned with domestic reform movements. At the same time, the persistence of authoritarianism in Belarus and Azerbaijan illustrates the structural limits of assistance. Importantly, U.S. strategies have remained adaptive, revising priorities in response to democratic progress or regression. The recalibration of aid to Georgia in light of backsliding, or the surge of support to Ukraine after 2022, exemplify this responsiveness.

Ultimately, **U.S. democracy assistance in the Eastern Neighborhood has been instrumental, though uneven**. It has inspired reformers, rewarded democratic advances, and provided vital resources for institution-building and civil society. Yet its effectiveness has depended heavily on domestic political will and external pressures, especially from Russia. Looking forward, U.S. engagement must remain flexible, context-sensitive, and resilient, with a sustained focus on independent media, civic activism, and institutional safeguards. Only by aligning external support with domestic opportunities for reform can U.S. assistance continue to foster democratic resilience in a region where progress remains contested and fragile.

8 Recommendations

With the drastic change in the strategic approach of the US administration it is hard to make any realistic recommendations for the direction and scope of the future US assistance to the region. The following suggestions can only be applied in the event that the US restores its interest in democracy promotion and ensuring stability and development through normative transformation support:

- Future US strategies **should focus on strengthening civil society, media, and judicial reforms**, adapting assistance to the political realities of each country.
- To **strengthen country-specific differentiation and design tailored strategies based on each country's political context**, reform progress, and strategic relevance. The U.S. approach to assistance needs to be adaptive and responsive to a country's progress. The principle of "more for more" (later adopted by the EU) and "less for less" should continue to guide the distribution of aid. Deepen long-

term support in reform-committed countries, while maintaining adaptive, resilient civil society support in authoritarian regimes.

- To have **more synergy of the US assistance with that of the EU**. It was not case in the past, but for last few years US administration started paying more attention to the EU aspirations of certain EN countries and even dedicated part of the assistance to support their integration with the EU. This trend, even though questionable with the current administration, should be kept and even enforced.
- Democracy and security are interdependent: neither can be sustained without the other. Continued U.S. assistance, coordinated with the EU, **should target hybrid threats, cyberattacks, and disinformation while strengthening defence capabilities**. To ensure coherence and impact, a U.S.–EU coordination mechanism on democracy, security, and governance is essential.

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