



REDEMOS

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

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Talking About Democracy? A Comparative View of Discourses in the European Union and Armenia, Belarus, and Ukraine

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Executive Summary

This working paper examines how democracy is discursively constructed and strategically mobilised by symbolic elites in the European Union and three Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries: Armenia, Belarus, and Ukraine. It explores whether a shared democratic discourse exists across these contexts and how convergence or divergence reflects underlying geopolitical dynamics and patterns of norm diffusion. Methodologically, the study combines cross-country comparative discourse analysis with norm diffusion conceptual framework, focusing on how officials, politicians, and civil society actors in the EaP reproduce, adapt, or resist EU-promoted democratic norms. Drawing on a corpus of 237 texts (2014–2024), it employs actor-centred coding and intertextual analysis – paying particular attention to discursive positioning and the modality-evaluation gap – to reveal how institutional asymmetries and geopolitical pressures shape the uptake and transformation of democratic language.

The analysis reveals three key findings:

Discursive convergence is uneven and context-dependent. While EU institutions maintain a coherent democracy narrative, its diffusion across the EaP varies. Ukraine and Armenia show selective adaptation, whereas Belarus exhibits discursive resistance. Formal partnership does not guarantee discursive harmonisation.

Civil society actors operate as discursive strategists. NGOs and think tanks in Ukraine and Armenia tactically deploy EU democratic language to legitimise reform agendas, challenge domestic power structures, and access transnational resources. Their engagement reflects strategic positioning rather than passive norm replication.

Democratic discourse functions as an iron cage for officials. EU democratic discourse often functions as an iron cage for state officials in the EaP: the democratic language becomes a formalised expectation that actors must perform to gain domestic legitimacy and international standing. However, this discursive compliance may mask resistance to substantive change. Understanding this dynamic is essential for distinguishing rhetorical alignment from genuine norm internalisation.

Based on these insights, the paper recommends:

Support local discursive innovations as forms of democratic ownership by funding creative civic campaigns, supporting culturally resonant messaging, or amplifying grassroots voices.

Establish platforms for transnational discursive exchanges through targeted funding, training, and transnational networking.

Create tools to differentiate between discursive compliance and genuine commitment such as longitudinal discourse tracking, actor mapping, and cross-referencing rhetoric with policy implementation.

Together, these findings underscore the need for a more reflexive, context-sensitive, and discursively attuned approach to democracy promotion in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood.

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Introduction

Cross-cultural communication is notoriously prone to misinterpretation because, as linguists agree, languages shape one's perception of reality.¹ However, linguistic relativity is not the only pitfall on the way to different cultures communicating. With uneven resource distributions, explicit or hidden agendas, and geopolitical challenges, different states misinterpret their counterparts' intentions, with detrimental effects on international relations. When one adds various societal actors' goals to such a volatile mix, the outcome becomes a minefield capable of dynamiting even the best intentions.

With these caveats in mind, the research team from the Kyiv School of Economics, the University of Surrey, and Yerevan State University aims to explore discourses of democracy in the European Union and its neighboring countries. The Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework offers a valuable set of cases because, by definition, it involves the EU's policies towards adjacent post-Soviet countries interested in closer cooperation with, or even integration into, the EU. For the purpose of smoother cooperation, the EU invested considerable efforts and resources since 2009 in promoting democracy in the EaP. As of 2025, the results are very uneven, ranging from consolidated authoritarianism in Azerbaijan to a non-consolidated democracy in Ukraine, from democratic backsliding in Georgia to tentative democratization in Moldova. In addition, there are significant geopolitical contestations in and around the region, as Russia's and China's policies are impacting the (geo)political dynamics and internal politics. These policies serve as a counterpoint to the EU agenda, since the Union seeks to promote democracy and safeguard democratic resilience. Adding another layer of complexity, it is not inconceivable that views on democracy vary across the EaP countries. In particular, what is conceived as a democracy by EU officials might barely correspond to what officials or activists outside the EU have in mind. Moreover, what if European guidelines are accepted only reluctantly and eventually altered to the point that their implementation has little in common with the intended results? Or what if, to paraphrase Israeli strategist and politician Moshe Dayan, decision-makers in the EaP think, "Our European friends offer us money and advice. We take the former and decline the latter."? One way to study these intriguing possibilities is to compare discourses of democracy in the EU and across the EaP. For this purpose, our joint research team focuses on three EaP countries, Ukraine, Armenia, and Belarus – the first one aspiring to join the EU eventually, the second one aiming for deep institutional reforms but, as of 2025, lacking stated objectives to join the EU, and the last one having withdrawn from the initiative after 12 years of reluctant participation. Not only does our case selection encompass half of the EaP (which is considerable given the tangible political, cultural, and linguistic diversity within the framework), but it also offers a gradual shift in country-EU relations, opening interesting avenues for comparison.

Theoretical Framework

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is exceptionally versatile. Specialists in social media analysis, critical sociology, and semiotics have different conceptions of the method and its goals.² For the REDEMOS research programme, discourse analysis is conceived and applied as a study of language practice aimed at revealing values, hierarchies, and fractures regarding democracy.

Discourses are typically conceived as "semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world (physical, social, or mental) that can generally be identified with different positions or perspectives of different groups of social actors."³ Discourse analysis, therefore, "involves the analysis of language data as evidence of social

¹ Boroditsky, L. (2001), "Does language shape thought? English and Mandarin speakers' conceptions of time," *Cognitive Psychology* 43(1), pp. 1-22.

² Bouvier, G. (ed.) (2016), *Discourse and Social Media*, London and New York: Routledge; Bouvier, G. and Machin, D. (2018), "Critical Discourse Analysis and the Challenge of Social Media: The Case of News Texts," *Review of Communication* 18(2), pp. 116-130; Kopf, S. (2025), "Unravelling Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS): Four Approaches to Studying Social Media Through the Critical Lens," *Critical Discourse Studies* 22(1), pp. 1-19.

³ Fairclough, N. (2023), "Critical Discourse Analysis," in M. Handford and J. Gee (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 13.

phenomena, theorizing language as communication, practice or selective constructions derived from accrued social meanings.”⁴

There are two broad research traditions within discourse analysis. The first one, commonly referred to as *critical discourse analysis*, is enshrined in critical social studies. Hall succinctly summarized the tradition’s principal thrust when pointing out that “discourse is about the production of knowledge through language.”⁵ Foucault was among the first to introduce the idea of discursive formation to describe the knowledge linked to society’s inner workings, e.g., power, institutions, beliefs, and values.⁶ Developing the approach, Fairclough suggested that people in powerful positions tend to control and regulate the way less powerful participants communicate⁷, thus delineating what can and what cannot be expressed; in a similar vein, van Dijk expects that the status or political position of those who speak correlates to the way some meanings acquire significance and gain preponderance.⁸ It is worth noting that in discourse analysis “politics” does not mean “competition for political influence” or “forms of government” but rather “a situation where the distribution of social goods is at stake.”⁹ Therefore, discourses are linguistic orders that mirror and shape themes, notions, and relational dispositions to be discussed or silenced. Since discourses are partial, any discourse is able to impose the dominant interpretation only temporarily, achieving what Laclau and Mouffe dubbed hegemony.¹⁰ A hegemonic discourse regulates relations between power holders and subjects, but rarely does it achieve the level of coherence in which subjects accept the imposed order of meaning without friction and, therefore, sporadic attempts to question the status quo.

Proponents of the second research tradition point out that critical discourse analysis scholars themselves err by being too narrowly focused on the critique of power relations revealed through language. As such, they remain dogmatic in their assumptions while tending to impose a universalist analytic framework that is unable to account for diverse cultural milieus.¹¹

To bring cultural foundations back into discourse analysis, scholars representing the second research tradition advance so-called cultural discourse studies, intended to account for rifts in intercultural communication provoked by the different orders of meaning inherent in each culture.¹² At first glance, cultural discourse studies might appear to be a research agenda emerging as a riposte from the scholarly communities of the Global South. However, its basic assumptions have deeper roots; namely, the early cultural discourse studies focused on contexts as essential loci for discourse formations. For instance, Sacks virtually established cultural discourse studies by analyzing everyday conversations to show how meanings emerged from discussions within a given context.¹³ Since contexts differ, discourses are bound to plural, disjoint, and nested in groups that use them. Besides, discourses relate to identity, for, as Gee put it, “each Discourse involves ways of talking, acting, interacting, valuing, and believing, as well as the spaces and materials ‘props’ the group uses to carry out its social practices.”¹⁴ In other words, discourses are linguistic

⁴ Taylor, S. (2013), *What is Discourse Analysis?* London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, p.27.

⁵ Hall, S. (1992), “The west and the rest,” in S. Hall and B. Gieben (eds), *Formations of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press/The Open University, p. 291.

⁶ Foucault, M. (1972), *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, New York: Pantheon.

⁷ Fairclough, N. (2015), *Language and Power*, Abingdon: Routledge, p. 76.

⁸ van Dijk, Teun A. (1993), “Studies in critical discourse analysis,” *Discourse & Society* 4: 249-283., cf. Caldas-Coulthard, C. and Coulthard, M. (1996), *Texts and Practices Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge.

⁹ Gee, J. (2011), *How to do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*, London: Routledge, p. 90.

¹⁰ Laclau, E. and Mouffe, Ch. (1985), *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*,

¹¹ Shi-xu. (2023), “A Cultural Approach to Discourse,” in M. Handford and J. Gee (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 41; cf. Carbaugh, D. (2007), “Cultural Discourse Analysis: The investigation of communication practices with special attention to intercultural encounters,” *Journal of Intercultural Communication* 36, pp. 167-82; Spivak, G. Ch. (1988), “Can the Subaltern Speak,” in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp. 271-313; Boromisz-Habashi, D. (2024), “Cultural Discourse Analysis as a Methodology for the Study of Intercultural Contact and Circulation,” in: Shi-Xu (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Cultural Discourse Studies*, New York: Routledge, pp. 252-265.

¹² Scollon, R. and Wong Scollon, S. (2000), *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*, Malden, MA: Blackwell; Shi-xu, Prah, K., and Parodo, L. (2015), *Discourses of the Developing World: Researching Properties, Problems and Potentials*, London: Routledge.

¹³ Sacks, H. (1992), *Lectures on Conversation*, Oxford: Blackwell; cf. Drew, P. and Heritage, J. (1992), *Talk at Work*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Gee, J. (1992), *The Social Mind: Language, Ideology and Social Practice*, New York: Bergin and Garvey, p. 107.

vehicles that mark, promote, and represent social identities to the extent that actors with different identities use different discourses and often strive to prioritize their own at the expense of others.

The differences in theory, methods, disciplines, and goals notwithstanding, the two discourse analysis approaches share four basic premises: (1) a doubt that knowledge is a form of objective truth; (2) the significance of socio-historic context for the formation of knowledge; (3) the foundational role knowledge plays in social processes; (4) contingency of social action upon social knowledge.¹⁵ To put it succinctly, discourse analysis hinges on a constructivist research programme that focuses on the “knowledge-social praxis” nexus.

Consequently, although the two schools are often portrayed as antagonistic, critical discourse analysis and cultural discourse studies overlap in examining how dominant actors shape others’ behaviour, values, norms, and, ultimately, identities through discourse. Examples range from educational establishments and the ways they construct successful students¹⁶ to police practices responsible for conceptualizing juvenile delinquency¹⁷ to colonial authorities collecting data on and disseminating knowledge about the native populations¹⁸ to medical professionals controlling who talks about a cholera epidemic.¹⁹ Arguably, their theoretical opposition notwithstanding, the common ground between the two approaches is the preponderant function of “positioning,”²⁰ a situational role of speaking from a dominant or a subaltern standpoint, with the subsequent outcome whether one constructs or accepts the hierarchical assemblage of meanings codified in a discourse. In other words, both critical discourse analysis and cultural discourse studies approaches prioritize “the relations of language, politics, and identity”²¹ as a strategy for understanding society and societal relationships.

For the purposes of this study, we will conduct a subtype of critical discourse analysis known as *cross-country comparative discourse analysis*. This method involves comparing discourses between countries in order to understand how cultural, historical, and institutional factors shape communication. Scholars use it to explore how similar topics (e.g., immigration, climate change, national identity) are framed differently in different societies.²² which is essential for revealing how democratic norms are linguistically framed, strategically mobilised, and contested across different political and cultural contexts. Specifically, by examining the discourses of symbolic elites in the EU, Ukraine, Armenia, and Belarus, we are intent on studying deeper power dynamics and normative tensions. Cross-country comparative discourse analysis enables a nuanced understanding of how democracy is not only promoted but also reinterpreted and resisted through language.while accounting for the different cultural milieus that contribute to additional layers of complexity and misunderstanding between actors within and outside the EU.

Norm diffusion

In the last two decades, scholars have invested much time and effort in conceptualizing the political role of the European Union in the world order after the Cold War. There is a consensus that, although the EU lacks military (“hard”) power, it enjoys considerable leverage as a trend-setter. Consequently, the notion of “a normative power Europe” has gained considerable traction. The central assumption is that the EU holds ideological influence and power over international opinion because it represents a successful experiment of

¹⁵ Burr, V. (1995), *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*, London: Sage, pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ Rose, N. (1989), *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, London and New York: Routledge.

¹⁷ Cicourel, A. (1974), “Police Practices and Official Records,” in: R. Turner (ed.), *Ethnomethodology: Selected Readings*, Markham: Penguin Education, pp. 85-95.

¹⁸ Hanks, W. (2010), *Converting words: Maya in the age of the cross*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹⁹ Briggs, Ch. and Mantini-Briggs, C. (2003), *Stories in the time of cholera: Racial profiling during a medical nightmare*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

²⁰ Benwell, B. and Stokoe, E. (2006), *Discourse and Identity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

²¹ Kroskrity, P. (2000), *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, p.1.

²² Husar, J. (2016), “A Comparative Approach to Foreign Policy Discourse Analysis,” in *Framing Foreign Policy in India, Brazil and South Africa*, Contributions to Political Science series, Springer, pp. 41–73; Krzyżanowski, M. (2010), “The Discursive Construction of European Identities: A Multi-Level Approach to Discourse and Identity in the Transforming European Union,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 13(3), pp. 395–408; Wodak, R. and Weiss, G. (2005), “Analyzing European Union Discourses: Theories and Applications,” in R. Wodak and P. Chilton (eds), *A New Agenda in (Critical) Discourse Analysis*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 121–136; Kostova, B. (2022), “The Potential of Contrastive Analysis in the Study of Discourse,” *Studies in Linguistics, Culture, and Communication* 10(2), pp. 66–80.

liberal economic development. As such, the EU establishes and promotes norms regarding political institutions and governance – not only within the Union but also in the region, especially in the Eastern Partnership, and even globally. According to the argument, the EU can promote desirable policies, ranging from biodiversity protection to gender equality to democracy consolidation, because it establishes and disseminates norms regulating respective spheres. Some push the idea to the limits, claiming that, due to its normative power, the EU amounts to a new empire. Although this interpretation is extreme, one cannot deny the EU's influence and hegemonic status in its relations with countries such as Armenia, Tunisia, Moldova, Bosnia, and Ukraine.

The idea of normative power hinges on norm diffusion: that those who establish and disseminate the norms have considerable influence over those who accept and internalize them. The notion of norms might refer to *fundamental values* (e.g., the inviolability of human life), *principles* (e.g., organisational transparency), or *standardized procedures* (e.g., the order of speaking), but, however defined, norms are guidelines for proper action. In this respect, it resembles power in its third dimension, which, as conceptualized by Lukes, constitutes a set of consented norms that regulate behaviour without overt coercion.²³ Or, as Merlingen and Ostrauskaite observed about the EU norm diffusion, “Norms are a tool of power that can render those subjected to it free (of oppression, violence, etc.) even while they impose on them the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved.”²⁴

Besides, since norms regulate behaviour, while actors can evaluate the outcomes of a given behaviour, they have a propensity to strive for better outcomes through norm diffusion. **Norm diffusion is the transfer of guidelines for proper action from a norm-maker to a norm-taker.** Typically, the process has two forms: (1) an emulation, when the norm-taker initiates the diffusion for their purpose, and (2) an implantation (when the norm-maker tries to impose the norms on others for whatever reasons).²⁵

For obvious reasons, implantation implies a more prominent coercive element; however, even during emulation, norm diffusion is rarely smooth. Conflicts are to be expected on two levels, inter-societal and intra-societal. To begin with, because most norms are anchored in collective historical and cultural circumstances, it is not inconceivable that different interpretations of the most suitable guidelines for proper action coexist. This is commonly referred to as inter-societal norm contestation, which is typical of international relations because, in the globalized world, representatives of different cultures interact and, sometimes, clash regarding the most suitable norms. For instance, the traditional Islamic and the contemporary Western cultures can dispute over the norms of gender equality.

In contrast, intra-societal norm contestation occurs “as a given norm moves downwards through the meso and micro-levels [from the level of states to societies and individuals], it will primarily be subject to contestations by societal agents within the state.”²⁶ The sources of intra-societal norm contestation are to be found in the different goals, experiences, and identities that various segments of a society have. Pro-democratic NGOs and governmental officials under an authoritarian regime, for instance, are likely to have very different evaluations of democracy-promotion policies. As a result, the former will embrace the norm, while the latter will actively oppose its diffusion. Moreover, attitudes toward norms are not categorical variables; rather, they range from high-fidelity reproduction to outright dismissal, with various levels of compliance in between. For analytical purposes, one can distinguish **three ideal types of norm diffusion:**

²³ Lukes, S. (1974), *Power: A Radical View*, London: Macmillan.

²⁴ Merlingen, M. and Ostrauskaite, R. (2006), *European Union peacebuilding and policing*, New York: Routledge, p. 16.

²⁵ Cf. Finnemore, M. (1996), *National Interests in International Society*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Finnemore, M. & Sikkink, K. (1998), “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organization*, 52(4), pp. 887–917; Risse, T., Ropp, S. C. & Sikkink, K. (eds.) (1999), *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Acharya, A. (2004), “How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism,” *International Organization*, 58(2), pp. 239–275; Simmons, B., Dobbin, F. & Garrett, G. (2006), “The International Diffusion of Liberalism,” *International Organization*, 60(4), pp. 781–810; Wiener, A. (2007), “Contested Compliance: Interventions on the Normative Structure of World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 13(2), pp. 273–303; Zwingel, S. (2012), “How Do Norms Travel? Theorizing International Women’s Rights in Transnational Perspective,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 56(1), pp. 115–129; Kolmašová, Š. (2023), *Norm Diffusion Beyond the West*, Cham: Springer.

²⁶ Orchard, P. and Wiener, A. (2023), “Norms and Norm Contestation” in P. Mello and F. Ostermann (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis Methods*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 55.

replication, adaptation, and rejection.²⁷ During replication, societal actors eagerly seek to mimic the norm as presented by the norm-maker or as observed in its natural habitat. Adaptation, in contrast, suggests that norm-takers are mindful of different contexts, to the extent that they try to fit the norm to their own situation and context rather than mindlessly copying it. As for rejection, actors perform it while explicitly dismissing or tacitly sabotaging norm diffusion promoted by the norm-maker.

Types of norm diffusion are relevant to the question of EU democracy promotion. On the societal level, the way the actor will react to norm diffusion is socially embedded, which means: the exact reaction to norm diffusion is contingent upon the actor's identity, the availability of local norms, and their correspondence (or lack of such) to those promoted by the EU. In fact, adaptation typically involves a process of localization through which states interacting with the EU align with European norms to their circumstances, thus slightly modifying or even drastically altering them. In other words, local actors' identities pose a limitation on the EU normative power.

As if to compound, there is a second constraint erected by the alternative norm-maker, Russia, which actively contests European norms and offers its own substitutes in the boundary regions of East-Central Europe and the Caucasus. The Russian factor aggravates both inter-state and intra-state norm contestation, as it provides states interacting with EU agencies and societal actors leaning toward the rejection of democratic norms with discursive and material resources to criticize, oppose, and reverse the EU-induced norm diffusion.

Synthesis: Bridging Norm Diffusion and Discourses

To summarize, a promising line of investigation emerges when discourse analysis is combined with the norm diffusion theory. The countries participating in the EaP experience purposeful democracy promotion efforts by the EU, which is driven by both ideological and security concerns. By doing so, the EU codifies and actively disseminates a certain discourse regarding what democracy is and the benefits a democratic transition should entail. Given economic resources and the normative cloak, the EU discourse is that of a powerful actor that shapes and limits the matter of the discussion. However powerful, the EU cannot unilaterally impose its interpretation of democracy: due to cultural differences, geopolitical rivalry, and diverse societal identities, actors in the Eastern Neighborhood replicate, adapt to, or reject the EU's democracy discourse. But which elements of the democracy discourse are internalized and mimicked, and which are rejected? Which clusters of actors in Armenia, Belarus, and Ukraine prefer one strategy of norm diffusion over another? And, finally, do geopolitical challenges, such as the ones posed by Russia, contribute to further acceptance or rejection of the EU democracy discourse? These are the questions tackled in this paper.

Research Design: Assumptions, Data, and Methods

Assumptions

The outlined theoretical foundations invite us to consider and compare the discursive formations of democracy in the EU and in three participants in the European Neighbourhood Policy: Armenia, Belarus, and Ukraine. In particular, we limit our attention to a relatively narrow set of performative actors known as "symbolic elites,"²⁸ namely officials, politicians, and think-tankers who establish and promulgate discourses of democracy. In doing so, we do not presume that ordinary citizens, both in the EU and the Eastern Partnership, cannot have alternative interpretations of what democracy is. Instead, we want to check whether "symbolic elites" in the EU and beyond share a common understanding of democracy.

²⁷ In our approach we, therefore, follow elaborations by Zimmermann, L. (2016), "Same Same or Different? Norm Diffusion Between Resistance, Compliance, and Localization in Post-conflict States," *International Studies Perspectives*, 17(1), pp. 98–115 and Dandashly, A. & Noutcheva, G. (2022), "Conceptualizing norm diffusion and norm contestation in the European neighbourhood: introduction to the special issue," *Democratization*, 29(3), pp. 415–432.

²⁸ van Dijk, Teun A. (1998), *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. London: Sage. Cf. similar focus on "arenas of politicization," elites and media, conceptualized in Chaban, N. and Elgström, O. (2021), "Politicization of EU Development Policy: The Role of EU External Perceptions (Case of Ukraine)," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59(1), pp. 143–160.

More to the point, our research agenda is twofold. First, we want to explore whether there is convergence or dissimilarities in the ways democracy is conceived in the two contexts, namely, within the EU and on its borders. The way to do it is to study discourses. We are especially interested in the effects of intertextuality, namely how an individual text (a political programme, a policy brief, or a joint declaration) draws on elements of other texts. Given the power relations, we expect the EU symbolic elites to provide most of the intertext elements, while Armenian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian actors should reproduce the democracy discourse or introduce only minor discursive changes.

Second, our goal is to explore the power relations behind the democracy-promotion discourse and the empowerment it grants to those who wield it. To be more precise, we assume that actors in Armenia, Belarus, and Ukraine lacking direct access to state apparatus (this studies focuses on NGOs in particular, but the same positionality is proper also to individual politicians or watchdog journalists) mimic the EU democracy discourse both to push for further institutional reforms, thus empowering themselves vis-à-vis the state apparatus and ruling elites, and gain some tangible material rewards (e.g., grants, connections with European officials, or status). In other words, we expect a cluster of *promoters* to emerge who tend to replicate or adopt EU discourses and norms. On the other hand, another cluster of *challengers* (represented in this study by effective powerholders) is expected to produce discourses of democracy that deviate from those originated in the EU or even reject them either explicitly or through sabotage.

By achieving the two goals, we are intent on the so-called “analytical redescription,”²⁹ a critical approach to discourses that helps reveal hidden stakes and unthematized presuppositions. In particular, we are eager to explore the discursive gap between *modality* (what is accurate and necessary) and *evaluation* (what is desirable or undesirable).³⁰ Namely, the positionality notwithstanding, all discursive actors should accept democratic modality, but there are to be further variations in evaluations of democracy and its performances. The rationale behind the expectation is that the evaluation “leads to the question of values – of what values are, of what values apply in which domains of social life, and of how they provide validity for the practices that constitute those domains”³¹ – and values of powerholders and representatives of a broadly conceived opposition tend to diverge.

Finally, discourse analysis is sensitive to and interested in historical dimensions, for discourses are historically produced and interpreted.³² To control for historicity and the contextual embeddedness of democracy discourses, we designed our study as one consisting of a *treatment factor* (a geopolitical challenge) and an *outcome* (discourse on democracy). We expect the discourse on democracy to undergo noticeable evolution after the application of the treatment factor. Therefore, the outcome has two forms: prior-to-treatment and post-treatment.

The design grants considerable flexibility in terms of the timeframe and even the exact nature of the treatment factor, contingent upon the circumstances in each of our four cases (Armenia, Belarus, Ukraine, and the EU). For instance, it might be the 2023 war and its ramifications for Armenia, the 2021 concealed state capture of Belarus, the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, or the parallel “geopolitical awakening” for the EU. The treatment factor must be considered of a structural nature; or, put otherwise, it is imposed on the discursive actors from outside, and they cannot help accounting for and reacting to it.

Our expectation is that after the turmoil provoked by geopolitical challenges, the discourses on democracy in case countries should further align with a newly modified hegemonic discourse.

While acknowledging methodological caveats, accounting for discursive strategies in which democracy is shaped prior to and after the geopolitical challenge contributes to a better understanding of values inbuilt into democracy promotion.

²⁹ Jørgensen, M. and Phillips, L. (2002), *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, London: Sage, p. 189.

³⁰ Fairclough, N. (2003), *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*, London: Routledge, p. 164.

³¹ van Leeuwen, Th. and Han, J. (2023), “Evaluation and Discourse Analysis,” in M. Handford and J. Gee (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 24.

³² Wodak, R. and Meyer, M. (2001), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, London: Sage, p.3.

We identify four core expectations for this study:

E1: In the context of EaP democracy discourse, EU symbolic elites act as norm-setters, while Armenian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian actors act as norm-recipients.

E2: As a result of the EU democratic support activities, clusters of civil society actors that replicate EU democracy discourses emerge in Armenia, Belarus and Ukraine.

E3: Across the EaP, official discourse is not expected to replicate EU democracy discourse but rather to either adapt or reject it.

E4: In the aftermath of global challenges, the discourses of national actors across Armenia, Belarus and Ukraine are expected to converge more closely with EU discourses.

Data and Methods

For discourse analysis, this paper focuses on *texts* produced by *symbolic elites*. Text is “a multimodal semiotic entity, in two, three, or four dimensions;”³³ thus, any relevant recorded speech or video presentation constitutes a text. Following the standard approach to discourse analysis, we will use texts “to work with what has actually been said or written, exploring patterns in and across the statements and identifying the social consequences of different discursive representations of reality.”³⁴ Symbolic elites are members of influential institutions such as government bodies, commissions, political parties, think tanks, or NGOs. Institutions produce a plethora of texts: political party programmes, think tank policy briefs, parliamentary resolutions, commission reports, NGO charters, and official statements (e.g., by the Minister of Foreign Affairs).

Due to the research paper’s size constraints, it would be inconceivable to harvest texts produced by numerous institutions and meaningfully compare them across cases. To explore the paper’s Expectations, the research team settled upon (1) *political speeches and statements by members of governmental bodies* reflecting the official discourse and (2) *NGO’s annual reports* as indicative of societal discourses. It is worth emphasizing that in this paper, “societal discourse” refers to the organized discursive output of civil society actors, rather than the everyday speech of the general population. At the same time, we acknowledge that these sources differ in genre and purpose and are therefore not strictly comparable; they are treated here as heuristic entry points into distinct discursive arenas. Finally, since the primary data is the so-called naturally occurring data produced and applied in a specific context, we presume that both EU and non-EU texts would emerge even without our study, and, therefore, unlike in other discourse analysis cases (e.g., everyday conversation analysis), the research per se is hardly a disturbance factor.

Given political systems, governmental bodies vary across our cases. Within the EU’s multi-level governance polity, the European Council provides the impetus for foreign policy priorities, the European Commission defines the constitutional dimensions of the EU’s democratic vision, and the European Parliament indicates the evolving political objectives of the Union through the positions of elected representatives.³⁵ To this end, a joint and comparative analysis of the discourses of these three institutions allows us to determine the form(s) of democracy promoted by the EU in the region.

For both Belarus and Ukraine, Presidential addresses (to the Nation, to Parliament, to the UN) served as primary sources because presidents play the single most active role in shaping official discourse there; in Armenia’s parliamentary democracy, speeches by prime ministers, the speaker of parliament, and ministers were used. For the EU, the research team parsed texts by the European Council, the European Commission, and the European Parliament. The total number of official discourse texts analyzed is 151 (see the individual sections for details).

³³ Kress, G. (2023), “Multimodal Discourse Analysis,” in M. Handford and J. Gee (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 140.

³⁴ Jørgensen, M. and Phillips, L. (2002), *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, London: Sage, p. 21.

³⁵ Hix, S. and Høyland, B. (2022), *The Political System of the European Union*, 4th ed., London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

To study societal discourse, we identified the most prominent NGOs selected by two criteria: (1) continuous engagement with democracy-related issues and (2) the availability of texts for the relevant period. The texts the research team primarily sought were annual reports submitted by NGOs, as these documents typically describe the organization's mission, core values, and most significant achievements. Each country team's first step was to create an original dataset including all leading NGOs, from which to sample a manageable number of observed subjects. While doing this, they applied three guiding principles: (1) NGO should represent different missions (e.g., fostering political reforms, fighting against corruption, promoting minority and marginal groups' rights, advocating social policies) since different goals should reveal different discourses on democracy; (2) NGO must be active both before and after country's geopolitical challenge (in order to enable a longitudinal analysis; and (3) all annual reports must be publicly available. These principles, when consistently applied, yielded 86 texts (the EU section naturally does not pertain to this part of the data collection, since we were not interested in societal EU discourses). **The total N for this study is therefore 237.**

The notion of democracy is multifaceted and versatile. To capture the discourses on democracy in all its notional complexity, the research team applied the varieties of democracy elaborated in Freyburg et al., 2024. As a reminder, the authors conceptualized six components of democracy: electoral, liberal, participatory, egalitarian, peacebuilding, and feminist.³⁶ Each component has its focal topics. For each of the four cases in this paper, the country research team constructed a separate codebook, meticulously applying the following principle: to code a text as part of democracy discourse, each time an actor refers to one of six components.

It was our goal to provide both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis, with the former applicable to longitudinal, cross-sectional, and cross-country comparisons, while the latter offers a more nuanced view of similarities and divergences. With this dual approach in mind, the research team analyzed each text (only human coders, not AI, were involved) to determine whether it referred to democracy at all. If positive, the team used a phrase (sometimes, a sentence or two) as our unit of analysis. For instance, when an official states that "the rule of law is a fundamental element of a sovereign democratic state," this phrase is coded as "*rule of law*" and included as a part of the liberal component of democracy, as referred to by the official discourse. It is essential that when a text mentions one of six components of democracy at least once, it is coded as a binary categorical variable "1"; if it failed to do so, it was coded as "0". This procedure yields a quantitative measure of the proportion of texts that mention one of six components, which is useful for longitudinal analysis and cross-case comparisons. For instance, when one sees that 23% of official discourses in Belarus after the geopolitical challenge refer to the liberal component of democracy, compared with 100% of NGO discourse in the same country in the same period, one can gauge the significance of that component for each discourse. In a similar vein, one can evaluate these proportions across different countries and compare individual countries' discourses with those in the EU.

To assess the level of convergence, it was decided to use the following yardstick: when discourses align at least to a factor of 0.75, this is **replication**; a factor of 0.25-0.75 means **adaptation**, and a factor less than 0.25 signifies **rejection**.

Admittedly, a quantitative approach alone might be misleading. To mitigate this possible negative drawback, we also provide qualitative analysis. Namely, while analyzing texts for each of the four cases, case research teams constructed codebooks to document what precisely the actors meant while referring, for instance, to the "liberal core of democracy." Given the study's E1, the codebook for the EU discourses was established first, and the subsequent teams actively compared and even contrasted their codes with those of the EU. Each time a team discovered that either official or NGO discourses highlighted aspects of liberal, electoral,

³⁶ Freyburg, T., Dobrescu, M., & Vlasenko, A. 2024. 'Conceptual framework EU democracy funding. Unpacking EU democracy assistance. What model of democracy does EU funding suit?'. *REDEMOS Working Paper D 3.1*. Accessed January 28, 2025. <https://redemos.eu/resources/publications/working-papers>.

or participatory components absent from the original EU codebook, it added a new entry, revealing the discrepancy between the original discourse and its local counterpart.

Analysis and Discussion

Each individual chapter is organized similarly: a brief overview of the political context and relevant historical developments, as well as case-related information for the analysis; quantitative discourse analyses for both officials and NGOs (the template is not followed in the EU chapter); qualitative discourse analyses; comparisons with the EU discourse. We conclude the section with cross-case comparisons and implications.

European Union

Historical Overview

Democracy promotion has long been a cornerstone of the EU's political agenda, particularly since the adoption of the Single European Act (1987).³⁷ With the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), democratic legitimacy and human rights were elevated to top priorities in lawmaking.³⁸ Article 10 TEU consolidated the principle that “the functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy”³⁹ and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union was granted legally binding status.⁴⁰ Over time, the EU's political outputs on democracy promotion have shaped a discernible democratic vision, reflecting the Union's normative and institutional values and priorities.

Protecting democracy within and around the EU was established as a core priority of the first von der Leyen Commission (2020) and reaffirmed in 2024.⁴¹ Together, the ‘European Democracy Action Plan’ (2020) and the ‘Defence of Democracy Package’ (2023) provide the most up-to-date overview of the EU's democratic objectives, including in response to recent challenges. As explicitly stated in the ‘European Democracy Action Plan’ (2020) “democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights are the foundations on which the European Union is based.”⁴²

In this paper, we devise a codebook based on the Commission's Communications on the ‘European Democracy Action Plan’ (2020), the ‘Defence of Democracy Package’ (2023), and the ‘New EU Framework to Strengthen the Rule of Law’ (2014), as well as the ‘Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union’ (2000, granted legal status in 2009).⁴³ The codebook is also informed by the most up-to-date EU-level framework on the Rule of Law (2014), which has underpinned the EU's Rule of Law toolbox (2020–present),

³⁷ Börzel, T.A. and Risse, T. (2009), “Venus approaching Mars? The European Union's approaches to democracy promotion in comparative perspective,” in Magen, A., Risse, T. and McFaul, M.A. (eds), *Promoting Democracy and the Rule of Law*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

³⁸ European Union (2007), Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, Official Journal of the European Union, C 306/1

³⁹ European Union (2012), Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union, Article 10, Official Journal of the European Union, C 326/13.

⁴⁰ European Union (2007), Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, Official Journal of the European Union, C 306/1; European Union (2012), Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Official Journal of the European Union, C 326/391.

⁴¹ European Commission (2020), Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2019–2024. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union; European Commission (2020), Europe's choice: Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024–2029. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

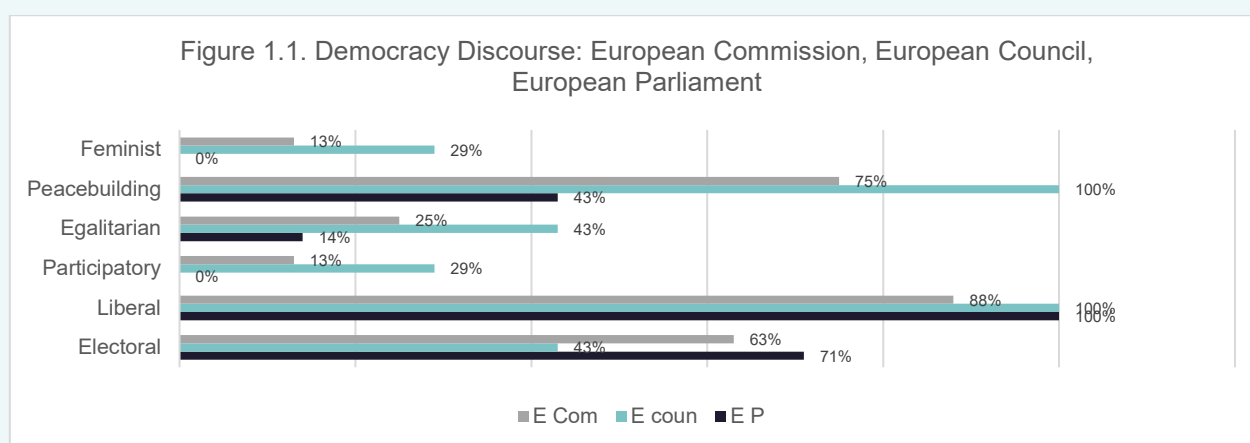
⁴² European Commission (2020), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European Democracy Action Plan (COM(2020) 790 final). Brussels.

⁴³ European Union (2012), Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Official Journal of the European Union, C 326/391; European Commission (2014), Annexes to the communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: A new EU framework to strengthen the rule of law (COM(2014) 158 final). Brussels; European Commission (2020), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European Democracy Action Plan (COM(2020) 790 final). Brussels; European Commission (2023), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Defence of Democracy (COM(2023) 630 final). Strasbourg.

as well as the ‘Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union’ (2000), which has been enshrined in the EU Treaties since the Treaty of Lisbon (2009).⁴⁴

Drawing on these four documents, we identify variables that operationalise each of the six components of EU democracy, aiming to track their prominence within EU institutional discourses. We do not impose a fixed number of variables per component, as, for example, the liberal component inherently encompasses more elements than the peacebuilding component. We apply our codebook to a sample of 22 speeches, press releases, and statements on the state of democracy in the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood delivered by representatives of the European Council (n = 7), the European Commission (n = 8), and the European Parliament (n = 7). To capture potential shifts in EU institutional discourse in response to recent geopolitical developments in the Eastern Neighbourhood, we use 2014 and 2022 as temporal reference points. The year 2014 marks the Russian annexation of Crimea, while 2022 is defined by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the EU membership applications of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. After filtering all publicly accessible outputs by the relevant EU institutions to retain only those focused on democracy promotion, we conclude with 5 speeches delivered in 2014, 10 between 2021 and 2022, and 7 between 2023 and 2024.

Data Analysis



The European Council’s discourse presents the most expansive view of democracy in the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood among all EU institutions. The European Commission’s discourse also addresses all democratic components but places a particularly strong emphasis on liberal features. Meanwhile, the European Parliament focuses primarily on the electoral core, liberal and peacebuilding components of democracy (Figure 1.1).

The remainder of this section delineates in greater detail the normative priorities expressed in the democracy discourse of different EU institutional elites, before proceeding to a joint comparative evaluation and an assessment of discursive responsiveness to geopolitical challenges.

Elements of the liberal component appear most frequently in the speeches and statements of the Commission’s representatives, particularly those related to *non-discrimination, transparency, accountability and plurality, the prohibition of arbitrariness in executive power, and judicial independence*. On the one hand, the Commission identifies these elements as binding normative ties between the EU and the demos of its Eastern Neighbourhood: “We share common values of democracy, rule of law, respect for international law and human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, as well as gender equality” [C1]. On the other hand, given the observed democratic instability and backsliding in the region, the Commission highlights these very same elements as those most in need of reinforcement for continued and enhanced cooperation: “At this stage, we recommend [...] strengthening the rule of law, fighting corruption and money

⁴⁴ European Union (2012), Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Official Journal of the European Union, C 326/391; European Commission (2020), The EU Rule of Law Toolbox: Rule of Law Mechanism Factsheet. European Commission.

laundering, and ensuring the rights of persons belonging to national minorities as key elements in this context” [C2].

Beyond the liberal component, peacebuilding elements, such as the *absence of armed conflict* and *other forms of violence*, as well as electoral core characteristics, including *open democratic debate* and *free and fair elections* also emerge as cornerstones of the Commission’s discourse. The former is expectedly emphasized in response to the Russian invasion but is also consistently connected to the ideals of freedom and democracy, which, for example, distinguish the “fight of the Ukrainians [...] who choose liberty” from that of “Russian soldiers, whose lives Putin has callously churned”, leading “a morally wrong [...] invasion” [C3].

Meanwhile, core electoral elements are presented both as justifications for the compatibility of Eastern Neighbourhood countries with the institutional and normative landscape of EU Member States – “Ukraine has a very robust presidential-parliamentary democracy” [C5] – and as limitations to their accession prospects – “We would like to see the end of political polarisation that has characterised the country, and we need the cooperation of all political parties [referencing Georgia]” [C6]. Furthermore, electoral elements are linked to both liberal and participatory mechanisms in supporting the EU’s emphasis on self-determination: “Any solution on Ukraine [...] must involve Ukraine, must be based on full respect for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, including the right of Ukraine to decide on its own constitution and political future” [C8]

In sum, the European Commission’s discourse on the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood emphasizes liberal democratic principles, particularly regarding the *rule of law* and *non-discrimination*. *Transparency*, *accountability*, and *judicial independence* are key supranational features of the EU political system, which the Commission has promoted with increasing emphasis both in discourse and in practice amid intensifying EU-level democratic commitments in the 21st century⁴⁵. As such, they expectedly take center stage in the vision of EU democracy which the European Commission seeks to “export” to Eastern Europe, differentiating the EU polity from the authoritarian tendencies affecting the region. Combined with the peacebuilding component, they provide a discernible “Western” alternative for the “Eastern” demos.

Similar to the Commission’s discourse, the liberal component is the most prominent for the European Council. Rule of law elements – including *transparency*, *accountability*, and *plurality*, *the prohibition of arbitrariness in executive power*, and *judicial independence* – are present in all European Council speeches and statements in the sample, while references to *independent media* are also notably frequent. The Council’s discourse favours “the independence of the judiciary” and “fighting” or “prosecuting corruption” as collocations, i.e. words or phrases that tend to appear together within sentences [EC1, EC2, EC4, EC5]. Moreover, legality and accountability are used as principles for outreach to civil society, which “has a critical role in holding governments accountable and clearing the way towards this European future” [EC2].

Independent media are approached under similar discourse and placed on equal standing with the democratic demos (citizens and civil society), with which the EU commits to maintaining consistent engagement no matter the democratic challenges imposed by domestic and external political elites: “In the meantime, the EU continues engagement with and support for the Belarus citizens, civil society and independent media”. For these reasons, “a well-functioning media environment and freedom of speech” are highlighted as essential elements for a democratic future in Eastern Europe, with the European Council explicitly “recognising the need for enhanced support to independent media” [EC1].

Regarding fundamental rights, *non-discrimination* remains a point of emphasis, like in the case of the European Commission, encompassing, ethnic, religious, language and gender parameters, thereby

⁴⁵ Cini, M. (2008), “European Commission reform and the origins of the European Transparency Initiative,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 15(5), pp. 743–760; Héritier, A. (2003), “Composite democracy in Europe: The role of transparency and access to information,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 10(5), pp. 814–833.

addressing both the liberal and the feminist component. The European Council's discourse calls governments in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood to "enhance the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including gender equality and ensure equal treatment between women and men, as well as persons belonging to minorities, regardless of religion or belief, ethnic or national origins, race, language, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability or other ground" [EC5].

Notably, the European Council's discourse features aspects of the participatory and egalitarian components of EU democracy (per conceptualization by Freyburg, Dobrescu, and Vlasenko, 2024⁴⁶) with the greatest frequency among the three EU institutions under study. Participatory democracy is highlighted both within and beyond the electoral core, as calls for free and fair elections [EC2] are complemented by demands for the inclusion of civil society and the demos in decision-making [EC1, EC5]: "Discussions in the Parliament create a good opportunity for inclusive approach and due consultations with all key actors" [EC5]. Furthermore, "*decent job opportunities*", "*economic*", and "*health resilience*" [EC1, EC3] are identified as byproducts of the EU's democratic assistance in the region, promoting an egalitarian outlook on democracy that supports long-term consolidation. This discourse is frequently encapsulated in allusions to a "*European way of life*", which institutional elites frame as the common aspiration of the Eastern Neighbourhood demos [EC7].

Finally, as with the European Commission, the peacebuilding component remains consistently prominent in European Council discourses, particularly concerning the absence of armed conflict. The European Council emphasizes the essentiality of both "*conflict prevention*" and "*conflict resolution*" for a democratic – and, by extension, EU-bound – future for Eastern Neighbourhood countries, including through "*EU field presence, when appropriate*" [EC1]. Moreover, commitments to "*sovereignty*" and "*territorial integrity*" [EC4, EC5, EC6, EC7] are repeatedly emphasised and framed as natural extensions of the five principles of engagement with Russia, established in 2016 following the 2014 annexation of Crimea (Council of the European Union, 2016). The EP's discourse strongly reflects its institutional identity. Speaking on behalf of the EU's branch of representative democracy, the EP's "symbolic elites" primarily address the people (*demos*) of the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood rather than their governments. In this way, they seek to foster connections based on common rights and values that define a European sense of self.

On the one hand, this includes the right to appoint elected representatives *freely* and *fairly*, similar to the democratic mechanisms that vest power in MEPs, thus aiming to inspire institutional and normative replication. For example, in condemning the February 2024 parliamentary election in Belarus, the EP stressed that "these sham elections were neither free nor fair", stating that they "lacked any semblance of democracy". At the same time, it reiterated the support of "people across Europe" for citizens facing political persecution in domestic electoral politics: "We know that one day soon your struggle for freedom will be realized" [EP1].

On the other hand, the EP makes extensive references to liberal democratic principles in its discourse, ranging from *human dignity* to *freedom of thought, conscience, and religion*, as well as the *safety of journalists, freedom of expression*, and the *prohibition of inhuman treatment and punishment*. Compared to the Commission and the European Council, which emphasize rule of law elements, the EP takes a more balanced approach to the liberal component, incorporating extensive discourse on human freedoms. For example, the EP identifies the safeguarding of "fundamental rights and personal dignity for detainees" as essential milestones for granting candidate status and makes explicit mentions to individual political prisoners, such as "Mikheil Saakashvili" in Georgia [EP3].

Last, as in the case of the European Commission and the European Council, the peacebuilding component features prominently in the EP's democratic discourse vis-à-vis the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. This encompasses both condemnations of sovereignty violations, such as "*repeated violations of airspace and the*

⁴⁶ Freyburg, T., Dobrescu, M., & Vlasenko, A. 2024. 'Conceptual framework EU democracy funding. Unpacking EU democracy assistance. What model of democracy does EU funding suit?'. *REDEMOS Working Paper D* 3.1.

brutal threat of force against your country [EC4], and strong denunciations of domestic human rights violations, including *“human rights abuses”, “torture”, and “imprisonment on politically motivated charges”* [EC1].

Following a pattern similar to the liberal and electoral core components, the EP’s peacebuilding discourse often deviates from macro-level geopolitics, primarily aiming to address citizens’ micro-level experiences under authoritarianism and war. This is strongly underscored in EP President Martin Schulz’s response to the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea, which zooms in on the *“fear”* for security and wellbeing among *“people”* in the region: *“Whilst some businessmen fear a spiral of sanctions, which could leave them with very thin order books, and workers fear for their jobs, particularly in the countries neighbouring Ukraine, such as Poland and the Baltic States, people fear the outbreak of a new Cold War”* [EP7].

Overall, our analysis highlights that the EU’s *“symbolic elites”* show considerable convergence in democratic discourses vis-à-vis the Eastern Neighbourhood countries, in terms of both formulaic language and content. EU symbolic elites emphasise *the rule of law* (most prominently the European Commission and the European Council), *equality and non-discrimination* (most prominently the European Commission), *free and fair elections* (most prominently the European Parliament) and the *absence of armed conflict* as the defining features of the EU’s democratic vision for the region.

Furthermore, representatives of each EU institution shape their discourse based on the symbolic connotations of their role and adapt their addresses to the setting and audience. As such, the European Commission, the EU’s supranational norm-maker, stresses *transparency, decision-making plurality, judicial independence, and the prohibition of executive arbitrariness*, with the aim of distinguishing the EU’s governance model from drivers of democratic failure in Eastern Europe. In contrast, the European Parliament, the EU’s voice of representative democracy, places greater emphasis on *fundamental freedoms and electoral rights*, directly addressing the people rather than the governments of Eastern Neighbourhood countries and promoting convergence between the Eastern European demos, the EU demos, and the EU’s democratic elites. Last, the European Council, affirming the EU’s executive actions vis-à-vis geopolitical developments in Eastern Europe, employs a more multi-dimensional discourse, including *participatory and egalitarian* components, to justify the objectives of democracy aid in the region and to outline necessary institutional reforms for closer future cooperation.

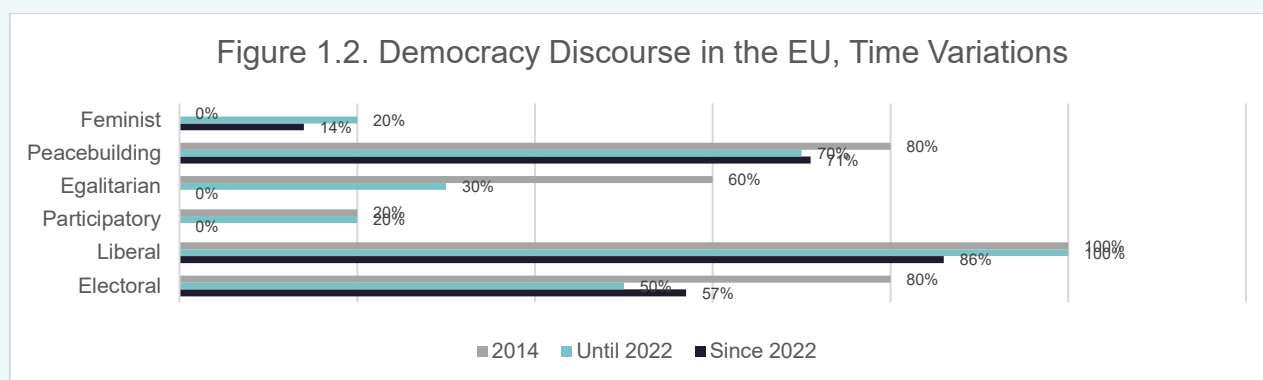
Crucially, despite institutional differences in democratic priorities, formulaic language exhibits a high degree of similarity both across the discourses of the three institutions and in relation to the foundational documents of EU democracy, which have formed the basis of our codebook. The Joint Press Statement following the 7th Association Council meeting between the EU and Georgia (2022) [EC5] exemplifies how closely the discourse of symbolic elites aligns with the de jure democratic model promoted by the EU:

“The EU encouraged Georgia to redouble its efforts to further consolidate democracy and reduce the political polarisation, to strengthen the rule of law, the independence, integrity and accountability of the judiciary and the fight against corruption. The EU also called upon Georgia to further enhance the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including gender equality and ensure equal treatment between women and men, as well as persons belonging to minorities, regardless of religion or belief, ethnic or national origins, race, language, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability or other ground in social, political and economic life and stressed the importance of media freedom and civil society engagement. Democracy, rule of law and human rights are essential priorities for Georgia to advance on its European path”. The preference for consistency between discourse and formal, written political outputs is further reinforced by the frequent allusions by institutional actors, especially the European Commission and the European Council, to bilateral agreements between EaP states and the EU [EC1], the DCFTA [EC5], association agreements [C1], the recommendations of the Venice Commission [C4], the Helsinki OSCE principles [C8], the Copenhagen criteria [C5], and the Charter of Fundamental Rights [EP7] among others.

Finally, EU institutional discourses show small yet noteworthy variation over time (Figure 1.2). While EU elites consistently prioritize the same set of elements *within* each democratic component – for example,

emphasizing the rule of law and non-discrimination in the liberal component – their discourse narrows in scope at the aggregate level in the aftermath of major regional conflicts.

Following the 2014 invasion of Crimea, EU discourse focused on electoral, liberal, and peacebuilding elements, alongside the egalitarian component of democracy. Faced with uncertainty about Russia’s ambitions and the broader geopolitical implications, institutional elites framed democracy – particularly the version tied to the “*European way of life*” [EC7] – as a source of stability. Virtually all speeches during this period emphasised “*stability and prosperity*” as long-term objectives for both Ukraine and the “*European continent*” [C7, C8, EC6, EC7]. Meanwhile, the focus on *access to services of general economic interest* – an important pillar of the EU’s egalitarian approach to democracy as highlighted in the Charter of Fundamental Rights⁴⁷ - strongly reflected the energy implications of Russian aggression, with institutional actors linking the goal to “reduce dependence on energy imports” [EP7] to broader regulatory, environmental, and egalitarian reforms aligned with the EU’s democratic model: “The Ukrainian government is aware of the need to reform the energy sector, in line with the Energy Community commitments and displays determination to commence these reforms” [C8].



Similarly, after 2022, EU democracy discourses have become even more constrained, focusing primarily on the liberal, electoral, and peacebuilding components, and supplemented by the feminist dimension. While egalitarian and participatory aspects, such as “*decent job opportunities*”, “*economic*” and “*health resilience*” [EC1, EC3], featured prominently before 2022, alongside civil society and citizen inclusion, these elements have since assumed secondary importance. This shift reflects a renewed transformation in perceived threats to democracy for EU institutional elites: from long-term structural challenges to short-term crisis outcomes. Consequently, both prescriptive discourses – focused on norm-making and institutional reform – and descriptive or responsive discourses – concerned with norm-binding and norm-reinforcement – now focus on a compact and discernible combination of the *rule of law*, *fundamental rights*, *electoral fairness*, and *peace* to distinguish the EU’s democratic vision from the realities faced by the Eastern Neighbourhood demos amidst ongoing conflict and democratic backsliding.

Ukraine

Historical Overview

Since 1991, Ukraine has been challenged with a triple transition: from communism to capitalism, from a colonial possession to a functional nation-state, and from dictatorship to democracy.⁴⁸ Given the sheer magnitude of the task, meandering, promising advances, and backsliding were inevitable. During this period, there were three significant contentious events sometimes referred to as revolutions (the 1991 Granit

⁴⁷ European Union (2012), Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Official Journal of the European Union, C 326/391

⁴⁸ Offe, C. (1991) Capitalism by Democratic Design? Democratic Theory Facing the Triple Transition in East Central Europe, *Social Research* 58, No. 4, pp. 865–892.

Revolution, the 2004 Orange Revolution, and the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution),⁴⁹ the latter compounded by Russia's annexation of Crimea and covert operations in the Donbas. Since at least 2014, the Kremlin has made it clear it is keen on hindering Ukraine's achievement of two tasks in the triple transition, namely, the establishment of a democratic nation-state. For this purpose, the Kremlin resorted to tactics of covert autocracy promotion abroad, instrumentalizing Ukraine's internal cultural and linguistic differences and allying itself with the faction of the political class eager to embrace and promote the Kremlin's line.⁵⁰ During the same 1991-2022 period, the EU first cautiously and later more vigorously used "link and leverage"⁵¹ to promote democracy in Ukraine, nudging receptive governments and nurturing civil society organizations. This rivalry between democracy promotion and "black knight's activities," compounded with Ukraine's internal discussions, laid the foundation for a telling swing of democratization and authoritarian backsliding between 1991 and 2022. However, the traumatic 2022 eruption of the Russo-Ukrainian war, which posed an existential threat to Ukraine, made cooperation with the democratic EU the preferable choice for both the political class and the population. For this reason, we opted for the full-scale invasion as Ukraine's primary geopolitical challenge.

As stipulated in the *Theoretical Framework*, Ukraine's NGOs are expected to replicate the EU democracy discourse due to the EU's financial and cultural power, which often enables it to leverage its influence over NGOs. Besides, both missions and visions espoused by NGOs may make them more receptive to EU discourses. On the other hand, official discourses are expected to diverge more significantly from the EU's, given other agendas and priorities, and also because governments, unlike NGOs, must uphold the notion of sovereignty, thereby being disinclined to mimic the EU's official discourse too overtly. Finally, it was expected that the geopolitical challenge of the full-scale war, combined with the dire need of European financial, technical, and other support and compounded by the urgency of the symbolic unity with the "democracy team" represented by the EU, will push Ukraine's officials – and by extension their discourses on democracy – closer to that promoted by the EU.

To study these propositions, we used annual reports submitted by 11 prominent NGOs, active both before and after 2022 (thus 44 documents for this branch of the analysis). For official discourses, we focused on presidential addresses. This choice was made because of the peculiarities of Ukraine's political system. Although Ukraine has adopted a semi-presidential system of government since 2014, the President represents the nation. As a result, presidential speeches tend to address important events, outline important visions, settle significant precedents, etc. Premier's (and broader, governmental) notes are typically of a technical (day-to-day management) nature. Given these features, it was assumed that presidential addresses should represent official discourses on democracy. We put "discourses" in the plural because between 2014 and 2024, there was an incumbency rotation, with President Zelensky bringing new visions to the office. Among other things, Zelensky had to seek political support from the EU after the 2022 invasion, which might have affected his discursive strategies. We deemed *addresses to the nation* (for Independence day and Constitution day), *addresses to the parliament* (typically, this is annual speech, significant both in its length and emphasis in which the executive shares the vision of the most pressing issues with the legislature), and *addresses to the United Nations* (the most representative international forum) to be most important speeches available to explore official democracy discourses. There were 20 such speeches delivered by Poroshenko and 21 – by Zelensky. In other words, 41 documents were used as sources for analyzing official democracy discourse, for a **total of 85 analyzed in the Ukrainian case**.

Data Analysis

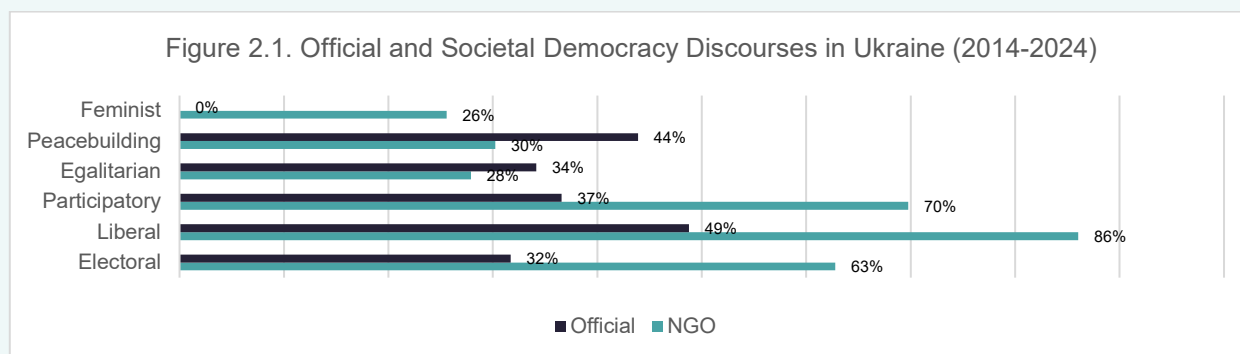
As Figure 2.1 suggests, Ukrainian NGOs in general tend to emphasize the liberal, participatory, and electoral components of democracy, with the other three trailing behind. The focus on liberal, participatory, and electoral is perhaps understandable, given Ukraine's tumultuous political trajectory, marked by a lack of rule of law, violations of property and individual rights, and the ever-present challenge of executive power

⁴⁹ Onuch, O., Hale, H.E. and Sasse, G. (eds) (2018), *Beyond the Euromaidan: Comparative Perspectives on Advancing Reform in Ukraine*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

⁵⁰ Tolstrup, J. (2014), *Russia vs. the EU: The Competition for Influence in Post-Soviet States*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵¹ Levitsky, S. and Way, L.A. (2005), "International Linkage and Democratization," *Journal of Democracy* 16(3), pp. 20–34.

consolidation. As a result, societal discourse tends to refer to and promote those elements of democracy that it deems both more essential to democracy and more endangered in Ukraine.

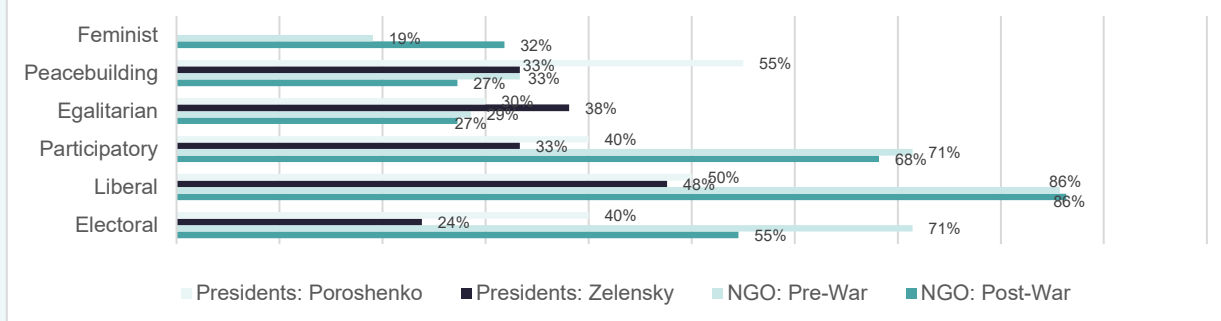


Still, it is revealing that, despite the military challenge posed by Russia since 2014, democracy is only tangentially considered significant for peacebuilding in Ukraine, which is more often than not discursively linked to the nation-state rather than the regime type. Another significant point is that, discursively, there are few links between democracy and egalitarianism. At least for the NGOs in Ukraine, democracy is not about diversity, equality, inclusion, solidarity, social protection, or consumer protection. The discovery is striking: even though we deliberately included NGOs focused on social policies (e.g., helping the poor, protecting people with disabilities), none of their annual reports mentions democracy.

Accents are put differently in the official discourse. On the one hand, five of six components are there, with egalitarian and peace-building components enjoying a somewhat similar (and low) status therein. On the other hand, perhaps unsurprisingly, presidents tend to gloss over checks and balances or transparency in political advertising, thereby deflating the electoral component's significance. Likewise, they prefer not to overemphasize the participatory component because the inclusion of citizens in decision-making may be challenging for state authorities. And much less than NGOs, presidents tend to highlight liberal values and principles. Finally, unlike in NGO discourse, the official one all but ignores the feminist component of democracy.

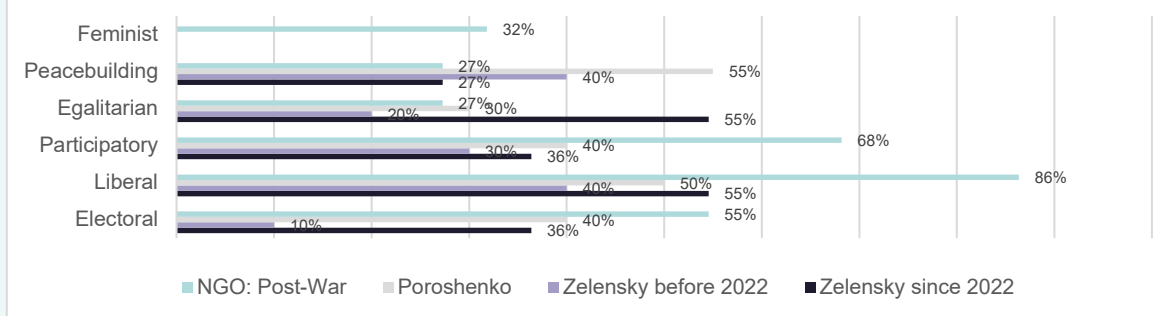
When we factor in the geopolitical challenge (see Figure 2.2), both similarities and differences become more intriguing. Most components receive neither boosts nor drops due to Russia's invasion. NGOs continue to praise participatory and liberal elements much more vigorously than officials do, invasion or no invasion. Significant war-related discursive changes are threefold. First, after 2022, both discourses downplay the electoral core's importance. Arguably, one should attribute this effect to the state of emergency declared in Ukraine, which suspended all elections. With the electoral processes constitutionally paused, neither officials nor activists deem it necessary to refer to the point. Second, growing concerns with gender equality and gender-related issues, which might be explained by war-provoked societal dislocations (for instance, massive male conscription questioned the traditional – and sometimes enshrined in regulation – domain of “only male jobs”) and ever-present danger of sexually motivated war crimes. Third, and most disturbingly, the data suggest that President Zelensky's discourse tends to downplay all components of democracy. For him, it rarely promotes peace; it is not about electoral principles or civic participation.

Figure 2.2. Official and Societal Democracy Discourses in Ukraine, with the Geopolitical Challenge Factored In



There are two ways to account for this singularity. First, it is plausible that, according to Zelensky’s interpretation, the Russian invasion posed a very real threat to Europe, making adherence to the official EU democracy discourse less pressing. Ukraine is ostensibly protecting Europe as its most important eastern bastion, so financial and political support would flow to the regime regardless of its democratic rhetoric. The summer 2025 measures against Ukraine’s anti-corruption infrastructure, initiated by President Zelensky despite the EU’s longstanding promotion of such institutions since 2014, illustrate this dynamic. They highlight a tension between externally promoted democratic norms and domestic political priorities. Second, Zelensky’s leadership style appears to favor concentrated control over dispersed participation. He elevated his Head of Office, Andriy Yermak, to a central position in order to consolidate authority, and in a recent interview he acknowledged preferring to deal with “five or six managers” rather than numerous participants.⁵² This preference for streamlined governance may help explain why democracy is largely absent from his official discourse: in four of his 2024 speeches, he did not mention democracy at all.

Figure 2.3. Zelensky’s Discursive Evolution

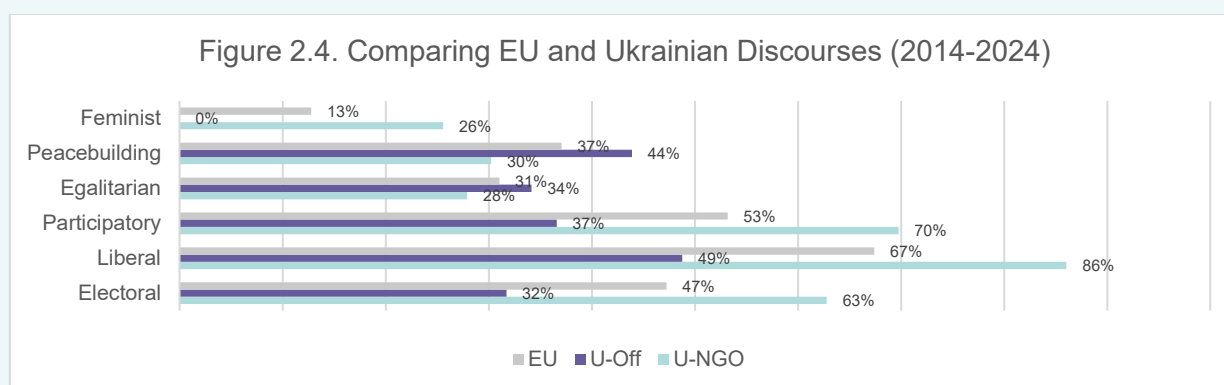


Second, this might be the result of data aggregation: Figure 2.2 presents the discourses as contingent on incumbency (hence, “Poroshenko” and “Zelensky”); however, Zelensky ruled for half of his term unperturbed by the geopolitical challenge. To the point, during the first years of his presidency, he rhetorically downplayed the extent of the Russian threat and aimed for reconciliation. Domestically, he came to power as a populist leader bent on dismantling the corrupt oligarchic system. Arguably, only the 2022 invasion’s wake-up call made him more inclined to value democracy and cooperation with the EU. To address this eventuality, we disaggregated Zelensky’s incumbency, using Poroshenko’s discourse as the baseline and adding post-2022 NGO results for comparison (see Figure 2.3). Figure 2.3 indicates that after 2022, Zelensky began to refer more often to positive aspects of electoral and liberal components (virtually levelling with Poroshenko in this respect). Besides, following his populist inclination, he doubled down on the egalitarian components, which is understandable given the massive societal dislocations and economic challenges provoked by the war.

The gap between societal and official discourses seems yawning. However, when one compares the two Ukrainian discourses with the EU discourse (see Figure 2.4), it becomes clear that officials and societal actors

⁵² Office of the President of Ukraine. (2023) V. Zelensky’s Press-Conference, 19 Dec 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h_V11zrA48

tend to replicate most of the EU discourse. The Ukrainian case, therefore, corroborates E1: Ukrainian actors tend to reproduce the democracy discourse produced by the EU symbolic elites. Given the discursive similarity across the 2014-2024 period and the lack of significant shifts in Ukrainian discourse provoked by the war, E4 is rejected. Finally, E2 and E3 are tentatively corroborated. On the one hand, NGOs appear to be trying to be holier than the Pope, constantly referring to electoral, liberal, and participatory components and exceeding the rates observed in the EU. Still, societal and EU discourses refer to democracy components comparably often (similarity is 74%, 77%, and 75% respectively). Officials, though somehow deprivileging the components in question, reproduce discourses with 68%, 57%, and 52% of fidelity, respectively. In other words, both discourses in Ukraine display a tendency to **adaptation**. On the other hand, officials clearly try to **domesticate** the EU intertext, while NGOs seek to **enhance** it; thus, we see the dynamics hypostasized in E2-3.



Qualitative discourse analysis provides additional support to the study's expectations. While constructing the codebook from NGO annual reports, we were able to track considerable innovations brought about by local symbolic elites, to the extent that a notable, "Ukrainian" variety of democratic discourse emerged. In terms of numerical frequency, innovations constitute almost half (44%) of the Ukrainian societal discourse codebook, compared with those originating in the EU. In a similar vein, the official discourse codebook contains 40% innovations. In general terms, this means that when activists and officials in Ukraine refer to liberal or participatory components of democracy, they often evoke something rather different from the European Commission or the European Parliament.

In societal discourse, electoral core means not only *free and fair elections* or *democratic engagement and active participation beyond elections*, but also *institutional transparency & accountability* [CEDOS-2017], *electoral reform* [CUA-2017], *civic oversight over political candidates* [CEDEM-2017], and *democracy's resilience during war* [RPR-2024]. Liberal component is replete with innovations necessary to ensure *civic oversight over judiciary* [CEDEM-2018], *educational transparency* [CEDOS-2017], *anti-corruption* [CPLR-2017; TIU-2018], *good governance* [CPLR-2023; TIU-2017], *transparency of parliamentary procedures* [CPLR-2024], *irreversible democratic change* [CUA-2018], *effective judiciary for business* [DEJURE-2017] or *education in democracy* [ISAR-2018]. The participatory component includes visions of *political decentralization* [LDN-2016; TIU-2017; CEDEM-2018], *e-democracy* [RPR-2018], a *public-consultation framework for law-making* [RPR-2024], and *citizen-driven policymaking* [CUA-2017]. While referring to the egalitarian component, Ukrainian activists link democracy with issues as diverse as *regional balance in university admissions* [CEDOS-2017], *inclusive support for vulnerable groups* [CEDOS-2023], *regional inclusion* [CUA-2018], *support of IDPs* [CUA-2022], and *administrative services access for all citizens* [RPR-2024]. And even though peacebuilding and feminist components are relatively less elaborated, there are still innovations such as ideas for promoting *non-violent interactions within communities* [LDN-2017], *gender-sensitive labor and education research* [CEDOS-2023], and *female representation in professional activities* [IMI-2023]. Societal discourse of democracy, thus, replicates the EU-derivative intertext regarding many acknowledged aspects of democracy (e.g., *democratic engagement and active participation beyond elections*, *media freedom and media pluralism*, *fair trial and the separation of powers*, *human dignity and rule of law*, *inclusive civic engagement*, *participation and deliberation*); however, it also adds context-specific variations or genuine innovations that reflect challenges and needs of the Ukrainian society.

Official discourse displays a similar propensity. On the one hand, by effectively replicating the EU intertext, it refers to *free and fair elections* [PPor10, PZel5], *fair trial and the separation of powers* [PPor4], *rules on the financing of political parties* [PPor8, PZel5] fully endorsing the electoral component. Likewise, significance of the liberal component is sustained by numerous mentions of *prohibition of arbitrariness of the executive powers* [PPor4, PPor8, PPor12, PPor19], *rule of law* [PZel11, PZel13], *cultural, religious and linguistic diversity* [PPor10], and *independent media* [PZel5, PPor19] to the extent that the phrases reach the rigidity of formulaic language. The participatory component, though less frequently, is addressed by *the inclusion of citizens in decision-making* [PZel5, PZel8] and the *rights to protest and assemble* [PZel7, PZel11]. In contrast, the egalitarian component is amply represented with remarks about *fair and just working conditions* [PPor1], *social security and social assistance* [PPor8, PPor9, PZel9], *environmental protection* [PPor13, PZel10], and *healthcare* [PPor9, PZel9]. And although the discourse remains ignorant of the gender dimension of democracy, tropes of the peacebuilding component are plenty and well-trodden, including *peace* [PPor1] and *absence of armed conflict* [PPor9, PPor11, PPor12]. There is, therefore, considerable convergence in democratic discourses of the EU symbolic elites and the Ukrainian political class.

Nevertheless, the official discourse in Ukraine is far from simply mimicking notions and conventions borrowed from the EU intertext. Just as with its societal counterpart, nuanced appropriations and innovations abound. Regarding the electoral core, the most significant one is the oft-repeated acclamation of *checks-and-balances* [PPor1, PPor4, PPor10, PPor19, PZel11], which occupies a symbolically important focus in the discourse of Ukrainian presidents, who, ironically enough, sometimes undermine the very principle they praise. Liberal component witnesses a comparable veneration of *anti-corruption* [PPor1, PPor4, PPor8, PPor9], but also *rights of national minorities* [PPor12, PZel6, PZel9]. Significantly, both are considered democratic instruments that enhance the nation-state and ensure national security, rather than as intrinsically good. This idea bundles with another innovative trope, *security through force* [PPor1, PPor7, PPor8, PPor9, PPor11, PPor12, PZel7, PZel9, PZel11], stipulating – as Poroshenko concisely put it – that “democracy is the instrument of national security” [PPor4] because it ensures economic growth and social cohesion, both required for building strong military, which in turn is necessary for threat deterrence. This rendition is practically absent in the peacebuilding component of the EU codebook, where democracy is believed to promote peace on its own. Regarding the participatory component, the most prominent role belongs to *political decentralization* [PPor1, PPor2, PPor4, PPor6, PPor7, PPor8, PPor10, PPor12] and *people’s right to just political dissent* [PPor1, PPor4, PPor6, PZel7], which, although present in the EU codebook, do not occupy such a privileged discursive position. All in all, official discourse shares the same tendency to elaborate on EU-produced discourse to address Ukraine’s pressing issues.

Summarizing the comparative analysis of EU and Ukrainian discourses on democracy, we must signal both notable similarities indicative of discourse replication and significant innovations proper to adaptation. Given this dynamics, E1 is further corroborated, while E2-3, though lacking conclusive evidence, are partially corroborated: it turns out that in the case of Ukraine, the EU symbolic elites indeed managed to establish democracy as intertext, willingly or unwillingly reproducible, but both officials and activists tend to acclimatize the discourse of democracy in domestic conditions, adapting it to national circumstances.

Belarus

Historical Overview

Described at some period of time as “the last remaining true dictatorship in the heart of Europe,”⁵³ Belarus, in fact, appears to be a foreshadowing of things to come. Since 1994, the country has been governed by a populist paternalistic leader who, being wary about liberal economics and parliamentary democracy, has been progressively moving from manipulating elections to eroding political institutions to jailing political opposition and, eventually, beating his citizens into submission with the help of riot police. Another prominent feature, better understood only with the privilege of hindsight, is Alexander Lukashenka’s reliance

⁵³ Rice, C. (2005). “Belarus is 'dictatorship'.” CNN, Apr 20, 2005. <https://edition.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/europe/04/20/rice.belarus/index.html>

upon Russia. Since 1997, when the Treaty on the Union of Belarus and the Russian Federation was signed, official Minsk has banked on close cooperation with Moscow to secure cheap energy resources, surveillance know-how, and, in 2020, “hard” militarized support for regime perseverance. In return, Lukashenka abandoned economically seductive but politically unacceptable contacts with the West, turning the country into an advanced outpost of Russia’s nuclear might by 2025.⁵⁴ This transformation, by no means abrupt but relatively gradual, nevertheless had a veritable turning point—the 2020 elections, which Lukashenko inaptly rigged, provoking widespread ire and mass mobilization, which in turn he managed to quell only by surrendering Belarusian sovereignty to the Kremlin.

Many features make Belarus an unusual object for comparative analysis undertaken by this paper: its civil society is stifled and, when active, is very often exiled; its geopolitical challenge, Russia’s annexation, is of a covert nature and partially abetted by the regime; its official discourse is quite likely to corroborate E3 due to Lukashenka’s dictatorial propensities. All this makes Belarus an outlier by default. However, far too often, Belarus was dismissed as an oddity, even though anti-democratic policies inaugurated by a populist, pro-Russian leader seem much more recognizable in Europe in the 2020s than they did in the 1990s. The point is: Belarusian discourses on democracy might exaggerate the effects we are interested in, making them easier to detect.

Just as in the Ukrainian case, Belarusian NGOs are expected to replicate, while officials should significantly diverge from EU democracy discourse. The geopolitical challenge, exacerbated by a hostile domestic environment for NGOs and further dependence on the Kremlin for Lukashenka, should simultaneously make NGOs more willing to emulate the EU’s intertext and Lukashenka more inclined to reject it.

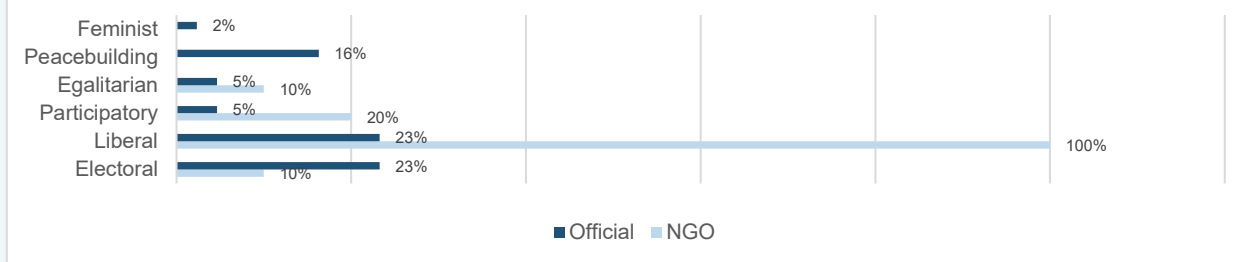
To study these propositions, we used annual reports submitted by 5 NGOs, active both before and after 2020 (n=10). We selected this sample from a broader sample of 20 NGOs, many of which went into abeyance in the mid-2010s or have no publicly available documents, thus being inappropriate for inclusion. In general, this epitomizes the considerably narrower field – as well as much more hostile environment – of Belarusian civil society organizations. For official discourses, we focused on 43 presidential addresses (Independence Day and Constitution Day speeches, addresses to the parliament, the United Nations, and the All-Popular Assembly) between 2014 and 2024, with 25 delivered before and 18 after the geopolitical challenge. Thus, 53 documents were analyzed for the Belarusian case.

Data Analysis

Belarusian NGOs are forced to operate under brutal, inhospitable conditions, which affects their discourses. As Figure 3.1 illustrates, the societal discourse on democracy is marked by tunnel vision—a resolute focus on the liberal component at the expense of the rest. While ignorance of feminist and peacebuilding components is partially explicable by the lesser salience of these issues in the Belarusian context, it is difficult to explain why both electoral and participatory components are virtually neglected. Admittedly, facing regime brutality (e.g., jailing the opposition, persecution of free media, violation of human rights), NGOs are likely to react to such violations by lionizing liberal values; still, this factor alone cannot explain why they do not address participatory and electoral principles. Tentatively, we would bring an additional explanation: agenda hijacking performed by the regime. Figure 3.1 suggests that, in general, democracy is rarely addressed in the official discourse: most of Lukashenka’s speeches tacitly ignore the question; nevertheless, when he does refer to democracy, he tends to celebrate its electoral dimension. Understandably, this is only a rhetorical device, abused by the strongman who maintains his grip on power at least partially through rigged elections, so that when electoral victory is secured, he can pretend he won fairly and democratically. Facing such tactics, civil society tends to avoid electoral issues altogether, focusing instead on liberal components.

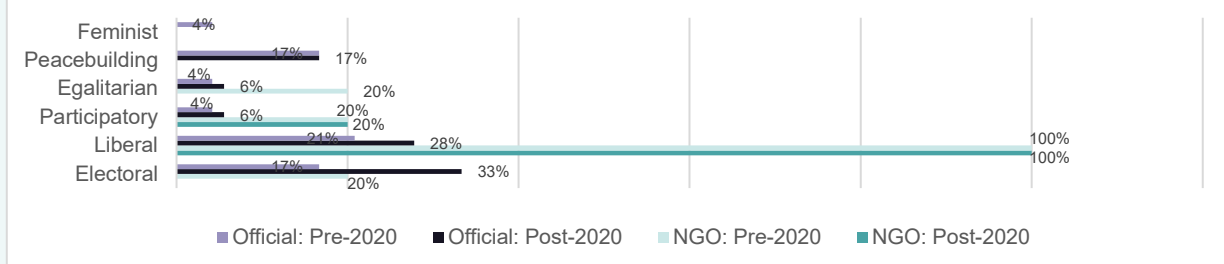
⁵⁴ Shauliuh A. & Furlong R. (2025). “RFE/RL Finds New Evidence of Russia’s Suspected Secret Nuclear Base in Belarus.” RFE/RL, Mar 26, 2025. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-nuclear-base-belarus/33357516.html>

Figure 3.1. Official and Societal Democracy Discourses in Belarus (2014-2024)



The single-mindedness of societal discourse is further revealed when geopolitical challenges are factored in (Figure 3.2): covert Russia’s annexation of Belarus failed to produce any significant changes, except for dropping references to egalitarian and electoral components altogether. No significant changes are detectable in official discourse either. Taken as a whole, Figure 3.2 encourages rejecting E4 for the Belarusian case.

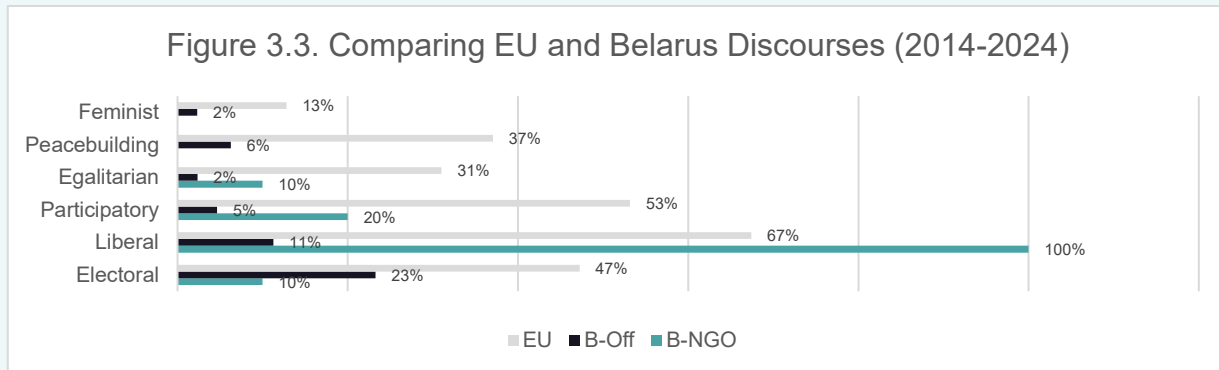
Figure 3.2. Official and Societal Democracy Discourses in Belarus, with the Geopolitical Challenge Factored In



Expectations 1 and 2 receive a modicum of support. Symbolic elites in the EU emphasize aspects of democracy other than those emphasized by their Belarusian counterparts. Figure 3.2 suggests that in Belarus, they operate in systems with different priorities. Regarding electoral, participatory, and egalitarian components, NGOs reproduce the EU discourse with little fidelity (21%, 37%, and 32%, respectively—hence a very vague adaptation), with only the liberal component meeting our definition of genuine adaptation (67%) in the form of hypertrophied valorization. Granted, Figure 3.3 lends credence to E3, effectively showing that official discourse rejects that composed in the EU: rate of fidelity of 48% (electoral), 16% (liberal), 9% (participatory), 6% (egalitarian), 16% (peacebuilding), and 15% (feminist); yet this is hardly a revelation given the political circumstances. It looks like the insular position of both Belarusian civil society and the Belarusian regime in the sea of Central European democracies has hindered communication between the country and the rest, eventually rendering concomitant norm transfers implausible.

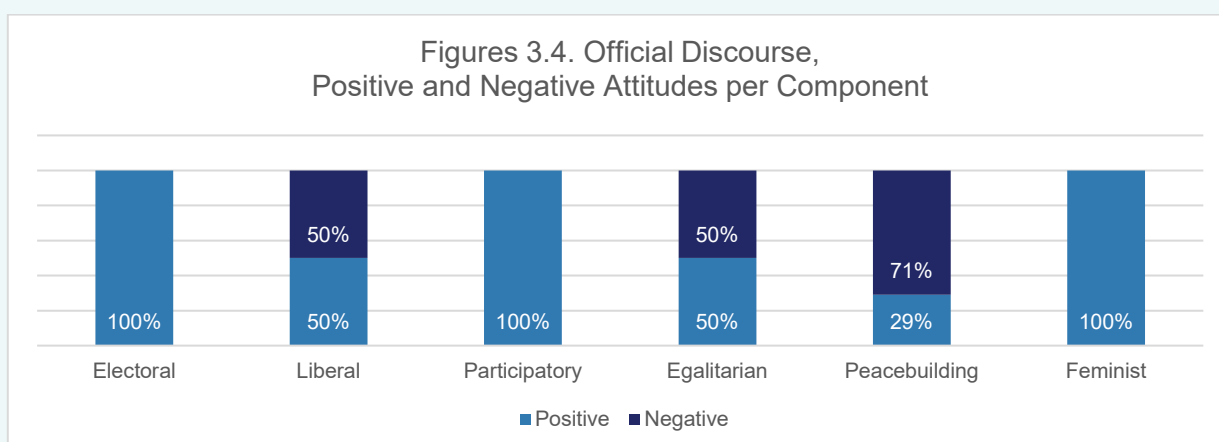
Qualitative analysis supports this conclusion. The codebooks constructed for societal and official discourses reveal some intriguing details. For the former, no single innovation or alteration has been observed. All reports, when referring to the liberal component of democracy, repeat the ideas of *freedom of speech, right for information, right to life, prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, protection of personal data, freedom of assembly and of association, fair trial and the separation of powers, freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and freedom of the arts and sciences*, in other words the codes covered by the original EU codebook. Pledges or requirements for a genuinely democratic Belarus to “introduce a moratorium on the death penalty in the short term as an interim measure” [BHC-14], to reform “the legislation [that] should provide for sufficient guarantees for the protection of personal data” [V-18] and the hope that “a self-confident civil society is the only thing that can non-violently remove a dictatorship” [CBEL17] are recognizable and well-trodden parts of the general playbook of democracy. It is likely that Belarusian NGOs internalized *this part* of the discourse to the utmost

perfection, enshrining the liberal component as the foundational credo and perfecting the formulaic language to the point where the ability to absorb, let alone produce, other complementary visions of democracy vanished. When other components are referred to, they appear as faithful reproductions of segments of the EU codebook, e.g., *integration of persons with disabilities* [BHC-14, V-18] or *inclusion of citizens in decision-making* [CBEL22].



The official discourse codebook, on the other hand, introduces some devious innovations, the most essential being **topic reversal**. To clarify: the coding procedure adopted in this study required that any document mentioning one of six components of democracy be coded as “1” using binary logic. However, throughout his speeches, Lukashenka often mentioned democracy as a *modèle à repoussoir*, highlighting its damaging effects (see Figure 3.4 for computations).

Most often, this rhetorical device was used to contrast the lack of egalitarian values in real-world democracies with the situation in Belarus and to illustrate that democracies are detrimental to domestic peace. Namely, the official discourse deplores “Hundreds of people who sought happiness in Europe, where they were invited, but instead were shot in the woods and buried in graves! Where is this enlightened Europe and bastion of democracy?” [LAft9], cautions, “Countries that used to be stable have been plunged into chaos and anarchy. All of this in the name of democracy. Instead of the promised democracy and prosperity, people in these countries are experiencing terrible suffering,” [LP9] and – effectively bridging whataboutism with civil strife scare – exclaims “We cannot allow what happened in Norway, where Breivik shot 77 people... Where is your so-called democracy?” [LP15] Another *bête noire* is democracy’s economic underperformance: “Why can’t we feed our own people at normal prices? One reason is that we got carried away with the market and democracy” [LP24] or plainly “Democracy is all about taking away and redistributing” [LP5].



All in all, qualitative data strongly corroborates E3: official discourse in Belarus markedly deviates from and intentionally rejects the discourse of democracy constituted in the EU. At the same time, it lends additional credence to E1-2: although EU discourse promoters in Belarus do not entirely replicate it, they tend to remain

true to its content. However, E4 is ultimately rejected since there is no detectable impact of the geopolitical challenge on discourse.

Armenia

Historical Overview

Like most EaP countries, since regaining its independence, Armenia has gravitated toward electoral autocracy, until 2018, when it “became an electoral democracy.”⁵⁵ Since then, the country has remained in the same category, suggesting some kind of democratic consolidation. The year 2018 was a significant turning point in the regime’s trajectory. 2017 represents the culmination of a pre-revolution period, with an accumulated sentiment for change. There was much democratic discourse, but in practice, democratic institutions existed in a somewhat constrained, often performative form. Although elections were held and reforms were promised, the political landscape was dominated by entrenched elites, systemic corruption, and widespread public disillusionment. In 2017, Armenia also signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the European Union,⁵⁶ which was a tipping point in Armenia’s relations with the EU. Moreover, in 2018, a non-violent transition of power and subsequent snap elections took place, with the country’s new leadership making explicit promises of democratic reform, justice, and transparency. Therefore, 2019 marks an important post-revolutionary period, with the intensification of democratic rhetoric in Armenia, which was mainly shaped by post-revolutionary euphoria and widespread public expectations for deep systemic change. This period stands out for the frequency and intensity of democratic rhetoric, offering substantial insight into Armenia’s post-revolution discourses.

In addition to typical transition challenges, the Armenian case is burdened with geopolitical complications. Since the late 1980s, Armenia has been involved in a prolonged violent competition with Azerbaijan for Nagorno-Karabakh. Because Armenia relied on Russia’s support, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue gave the Kremlin additional leverage to influence Yerevan’s foreign and domestic policies. However, the 2023 Azerbaijani offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh effectively terminated the Republic of Artsakh and expelled the Russian contingent, and induced the two countries to settle the issue. The Nagorno-Karabakh war and the eventual 2023 settlement have reshaped Armenia’s security narratives by exposing the vulnerability of its previous security arrangements. Essentially, Armenia severed its long-standing security ties with Moscow and initiated a strategic pivot toward the European Union.

Given these tumultuous and multifaceted circumstances, a tripartite temporal focus has been selected for the analysis (2017, 2019, and 2024). These years serve not only as markers of significant domestic and geopolitical change, but also as discursive turning points where the language of democracy is rearticulated in response to new internal challenges and evolving external alignments.

A corpus of 45 speeches has been selected from 2017, 2019, and 2024 (15 speeches per year), delivered by prime ministers, presidents, speakers of parliament, foreign ministers, and other ministers then in office. The texts were selected based on their prominence (e.g., national addresses, international forums, inaugural statements, remarks at special events, annual reports) and their relevance to the research themes. The societal discourse corpus comprises six Armenian civil society organizations, selected for their continuous engagement with democratic governance, human rights, and institutional reform, as well as for the availability of written output for the relevant period. It includes 32 annual, interim, and activity reports spanning the selected years.

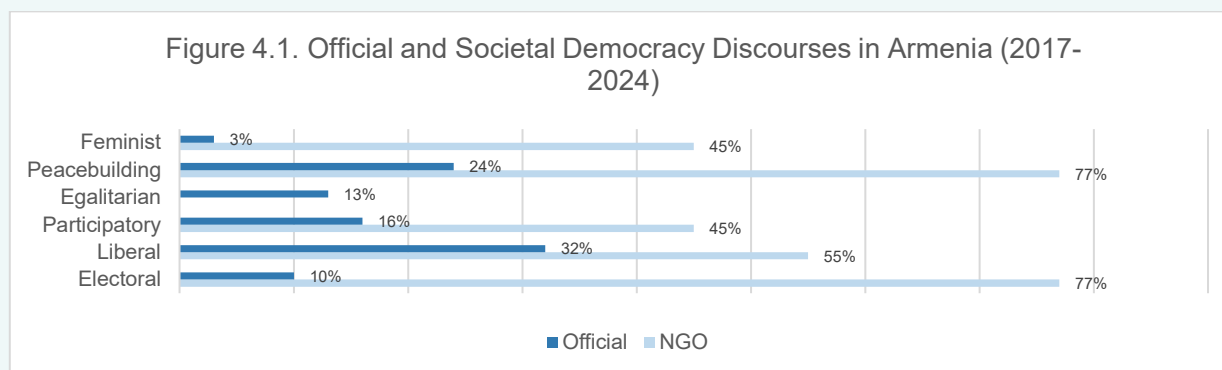
Data Analysis

Governmental actors speak from institutional positions of authority, and their public statements play a central role in shaping both internal narratives and Armenia’s international image. Government discourse,

⁵⁵ Nord, M., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Fernandes, T., Good God, A., & Lindberg, S. (2025) “Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?” *University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute*, 19.

⁵⁶ European External Action Service (2023), “EU and Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA),” *European Union External Action*, last modified 1 March 2023.

therefore, holds particular significance, as political elites use such language not only to describe policy priorities but also to shape and assert their legitimacy. The non-governmental organizations, on the other hand, contribute from positions rooted in advocacy and societal engagement.



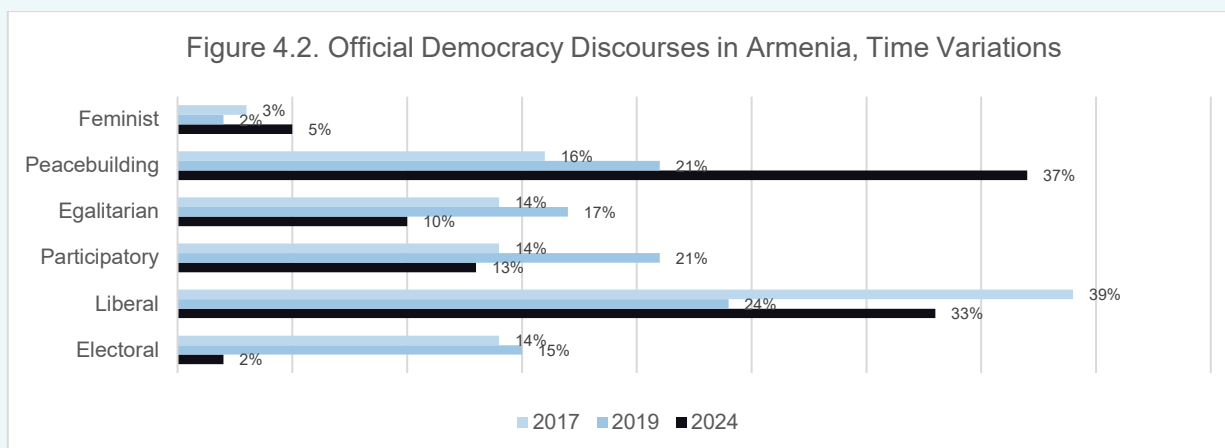
Given these differences, it is not surprising that there are notable discrepancies in the importance placed on components of democracy and those mentioned in each discourse (Figure 4.1). The egalitarian component apart, societal discourse is much more focused on democracy than the official one. Even when one controls for context-dependent time variations (Figures 4.2 and 4.3), the gaps separating priorities of two discourses remain prominent. However, there are notable fluctuations between the three periods that must be addressed in detail.

In 2017, official discourse was largely driven by efforts to align with international norms while maintaining domestic influence. This period reflects a language of formalism. Under President Sargsyan, democratic remarks were primarily associated with legal and institutional modernization, rule of law, especially in the context of Armenia’s agreement with the European Union [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2017].

The dominant component in 2017 speeches was liberal, with recurring mentions of mainly *rule of law, governance reform, judicial independence, reduction of corruption, and human rights*. However, these references to human rights were often broad and lacked specificity, functioning more as rhetorical conformity with external expectations, rather than marking meaningful and specific domestic reform agendas. Speeches tended to treat human rights as part of a general reform vocabulary, without demonstrating depth of commitment or policy substance. For example, during inaugural speech President Sargsyan said: “Constitutional amendments allowed to create an efficient constitutional base so that human rights are constitutionally recognized, ensured legally, supported and protected by adequate provisions.” [President of the Republic of Armenia 2017]. Such language reflects a broader trend in the 2017 discourse, where liberal democratic language was present and dominant, but greatly instrumental, to create a discursive image and atmosphere of democratic reform while preserving the established political order.

The electoral component highlighted the intent to conduct “*democratic, free, fair, and transparent elections*”, but this is ultimately a mechanism to reach “*more balanced, efficient, controllable, and consolidated authorities*” (President of the Republic of Armenia 2017). Elections, therefore, were viewed less as a means of enabling democratic participation and more as a tool for reinforcing authority. In 2017, the peacebuilding component prioritized peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, regional stability, and conflict prevention through diplomacy, while also continuously developing military capacities. On the other hand, feminist component was all but ignored, being largely reduced to short remarks recognising domestic violence and referencing UN CEDAW [Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Armenia 2017]. In particular, feminist components are notoriously absent at the highest levels (prime minister or president). Likewise, participatory rhetoric was vague, with only brief mentions of the importance of engaging with civil society actors. Finally, egalitarian references were minimal but included mentions of the state's responsibility to reduce poverty, improve *access to education, healthcare, or digital services, and ensure social protection for vulnerable groups*.

Figure 4.2. Official Democracy Discourses in Armenia, Time Variations

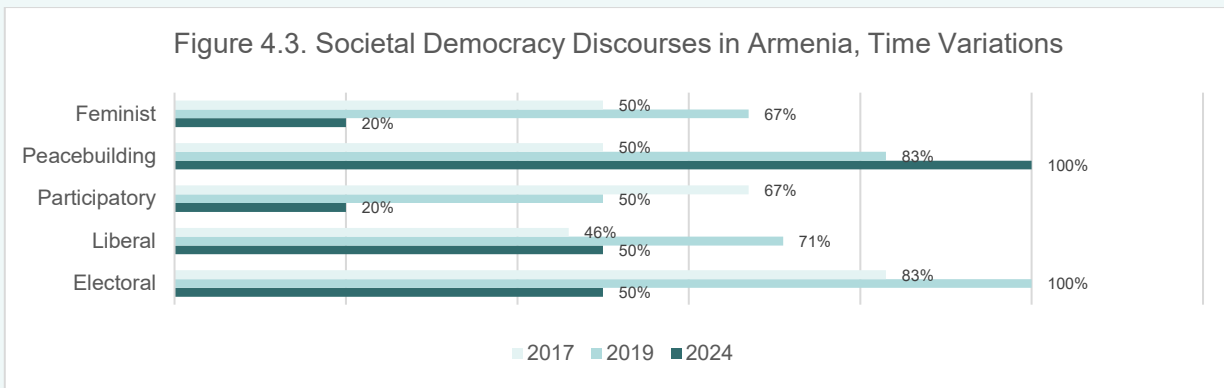


By 2019, the Armenian government's discourse underwent a clear transformation following the Velvet Revolution and regime change in 2018. With a strong electoral mandate and widespread popular support, the new authorities place greater emphasis on democratic values and their promotion. References to democratic principles became more substantive, internally focused, and emphasized political reconstruction, transparency, and citizen empowerment. In particular, the participatory component witnessed a considerable rise, with frequent references to the importance of *civic participation, engagement with civil society, and public consolidation*. The participatory discourse, of course, was intertwined with the revolutionary rhetoric, representing regime change as an expression of collective civic will and stressing the importance of maintaining the democratic momentum through public engagement. The liberal component, though less frequently referenced, circulated as promises of *anti-corruption, judicial reform, and state accountability*. Likewise, the electoral component remained articulated. The legitimacy granted by the 2018 parliamentary elections was frequently invoked by government officials, who presented them as the cornerstone of a new democratic era. Finally, some references to egalitarian component were present, especially in relation to social welfare. The government's efforts to alleviate *housing, unemployment, and poverty* were framed as fundamental democratic duties [Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia 2019c]. And although the feminist component was articulated at the highest levels, as FM Mnatsakanyan promised to “increase the role of women in all spheres of our society, protection and advancement of women’s rights remain an important priority of our reforms” [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2019], it remained largely decoupled from the broader discourse. The peacebuilding component emerged as a central theme, with the ruling elite highlighting the need for finding a negotiated resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the importance of regional dialogue [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2019].

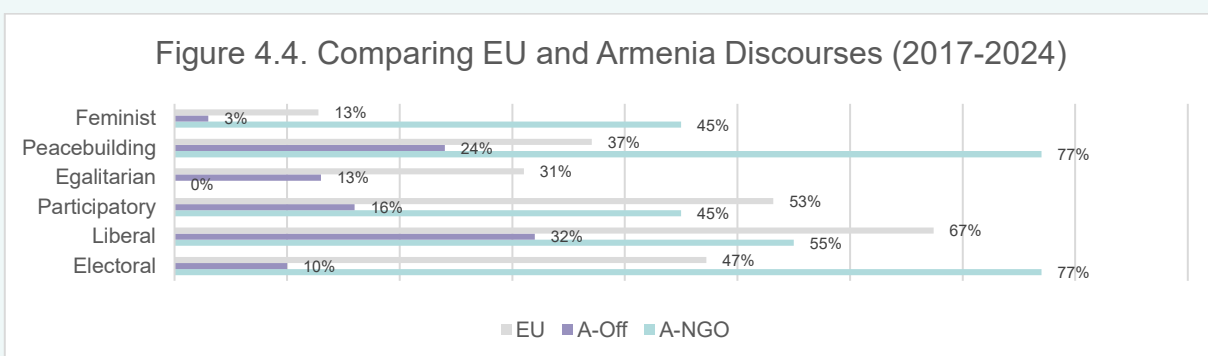
The year 2024 witnessed significant changes. The geopolitical challenges, including Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, forced the Armenian authorities to reconsider their security alignment and reorient foreign policy on peace, sovereignty, and closer integration with the European Union. Permanent peace was consistently a top priority for government officials. Speeches by high-level officials consistently framed democracy and peace as intertwined, suggesting that institutional reform, foreign policy reorientation must converge to preserve Armenia’s statehood. *Judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, and public administration* were also present in the liberal discourse like in previous years under study. However, unlike in 2017 and 2019, these topics were frequently part of broader peace-related goals. They portrayed reforms as necessary to prepare Armenia for constructive engagement with regional and international actors, including the normalization process with Azerbaijan and closer integration with the European Union. For instance, prospects of visa regime liberalization was presented as a sign of Armenia's progress on its European path: “We just launched the Visa liberalization dialogue, we just got the support of the EU under the European Peace Facility, which is almost an unbelievable thing, considering the fact that Armenia is still a formal member of the CSTO” [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2024b]. The participatory, feminist, and egalitarian elements that marked 2019 largely receded. 2024 stands out with a discourse full of heavy security concerns and instrumentalization of democracy to tackle external and internal challenges and consolidate power.

Accents and emphases were put rather differently in societal discourses throughout the three periods. In 2017 it offered a critical perspective on Armenia's democratic transformation. The NGOs, foundations, and research institutes outlined governance shortcomings and presented observations regarding democratic aspects that require reform and improvement. The language expressed scepticism toward official reform commitments: "Our governance is so deeply dysfunctional that it almost does not make sense suggesting a holistic reform plan. That is why political parties do not have any such during the election circles, nor do the opposition ones pursue piecemeal changes in-between of elections. Although such plans do exist, they face the risk of being 'eaten up' by the systemic dysfunctionality of the whole" [Eurasia Partnership Foundation, 2018]. The dominant component was electoral. Civil society reports focused on manipulation of electoral procedures and bribery, vote buying, and other electoral manipulations thus marking a notable divergence from the governmental discourse, which celebrated democratic, free, and transparent election efforts. Equally essential was liberal component, though it also received predominantly critical rendition reporting shortcomings and advocating for change. The NGOs point to the absence of accountable governance and public trust towards the ruling elites. The reports stress the persistent issues of combating hate crimes and no significant advancement in promoting the anti-discrimination agenda on the legislative level in Armenia [Eurasia Partnership Foundation, 2018, 6]. Concerns were also expressed regarding the external and internal dimensions of peace in the country. The NGOs criticised the state propaganda around peacebuilding, suggesting they exacerbated polarization rather than fostered dialogue [Eurasia Partnership Foundation, 2018] and aimed to promote dialogue among the young generations. Another notable feature of the 2017 societal discourse was the way CSOs addressed gaps in the areas of participatory and feminist democracy. While official statements were vague and unsubstantial in these areas, NGOs highlighted the importance of inclusive education, the equal rights of men and women, and the need for participatory decision-making mechanisms that would involve civil society. Discourse on gender equality was largely tied to electoral participation and the formal recognition of women's rights in party programmes, though the CSOs noted these commitments were often superficial. "The election programmes of political parties did not directly target the issue of women's participation in public and political life. Besides, women candidates themselves omitted gender equality issues in their campaigns and prioritized more the discussion of widespread social issues in the country" [Oxygen Foundation, 2017].

After the Velvet revolution societal actors started emphasizing opportunities for reform, public engagement, and participatory governance in a more constructive and cooperative tone than they did in 2017. Civil society promoted inclusivity and wide-ranging discourse, seeing itself as both a watchdog and a collaborator in democratisation. Following the revolution, the liberal component was figured largely in 2019. Various aspects of liberal democracy, e.g. *right to education*, *reform of formal education*, *the role of independent media* as an oversight body, *civic engagement*, *efficient judicial overview* were included in projects of the NGOs. All in all, they hoped "the Velvet Revolution in 2018 [...] created a fertile ground for civil society to have more open and in-depth value conversations with both the new government and the public. There was and is a significant need in conversations that will lead to radical and lasting positive changes in policy-making" [Eurasia Partnership Foundation, 2019]. The feminist component grew more visible: NGOs explicitly linked democratic reform to *gender equality*, *women's leadership*, and *empowerment*. One project study on women's electoral and political participation highlighted that "women should be there to make their decisions during decision-making so that it is more rightful and there is equality" [Oxygen Foundation, 2019]. Crucially, this discourse was less abstract than government references, grounding gender equality in concrete projects and advocacy campaigns. On the other hand, the electoral component though still significant, evolved since 2017. Rather than deploring fraudulent practices, CSOs expressed cautious optimism in regard to the establishment of democratic election practices.

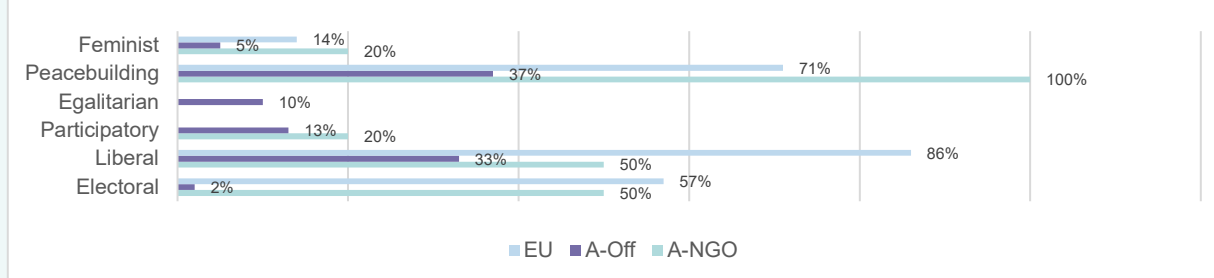


Finally in 2024, the civil society discourse was again dominated by liberal and participatory discourses, as the civil society continued to engage in efforts aimed at fostering *independent media, anti-discrimination agenda, inclusive decision-making, labour rights, and accountable judicial system*. The liberal discourse was impacted by the post-war military sentiment and narratives present in the society. As one organization admitted, “Democracy’s true strength lies in its ability to unite people, foster trust, address grievances, and lay the foundation for lasting stability” [Peace Dialogue, 2024]. At the same time, grassroots initiatives reinforced the pro-European dimension of civil discourse: the Eurovote campaign, for instance, mobilised citizens to collect signatures and call on the Armenian government to launch the EU accession process. The petition was accepted by parliament and voted later in February 2025 [Politico, 2024]. The feminist component albeit less frequent was referred to as civil society monitored issues related to women’s political participation and gender-based violence. In particular, media narratives reinforcing gender-based discrimination were scrutinized [Oxygen Foundation, 2024]. Civil society was also visibly present in the peacebuilding component as the larger public was invited to engage in political dialogue. The focus was on addressing systemic challenges in the defence sector, fostering inclusive peacebuilding efforts, and empowering communities. From focus group discussions engaging academia and media representatives, to regional platforms for regular policy discussions in the border provinces of Armenia [Caucasus Institute], the CSO efforts were aimed at inviting the society into a meaningful policy dialogue in the capital and in the regions.



To what extent do Armenian official and societal discourses correspond to the European intertext? This might be a challenging question to tackle, given the shifts in discursive priorities discussed above and the variations in components. If taken for the observed period in its entirety, official discourse, though displaying various levels of fidelity (12% for electoral, 47% for liberal, 30% for participatory, 43% for egalitarian, 64% for peacebuilding, and 23% for feminist components), *in toto* is indicative of adaptation. Societal discourse, with its fidelity rates of 61% for electoral, 82% for liberal, 84% for participatory, 0% for egalitarian, 48% for peacebuilding, and 28% for feminist, lingers between replication in some components and adaptation in others (see Figure 4.4). Qualitative analysis, however, shows significant similarities between the EU and Armenian codebooks, suggesting selective, context-dependent replication. Taken together, this evidence corroborates E1-3.

Figure 4.5. Comparing EU and Armenia Discourses (Since 2022)



To test E4, we focused on comparing data after the EU’s and Armenia’s geopolitical challenges (see Figure 4.5). There are signs of further realignment in discursive priorities for electoral, egalitarian, participatory, peacebuilding, and feminist components – especially of EU and societal discourses. The central discursive locus of dealignment is the liberal component, which grew considerably more accentuated in the EU. Nevertheless, when combined with qualitative data from codebooks, E4 is corroborated as well.

Discussion

The analysis of discourses of democracy in three EaP countries indicates considerable power of norm diffusion, which the EU exercises over its neighbors. Table 1 summarizes results across the three cases, which, taken together, suggest that EaP actors indeed tend to conceive and promote democracy in line with the principles outlined by EU institutions. As expected, civil society, bent on bolstering democratic norms at home, typically replicates the EU discourse, prioritizing the same components of democracy and reproducing much of its discursive content (e.g., emphasizing resilient electoral processes, freedom of information, and the inclusion of citizens in decision-making). Arguably, NGOs emulate the EU discourse because it is cloaked in the power and prestige of EU institutions, which effectively help civil society further its goals. While it is possible that NGOs also align their discourse with positions of individual EU member states or other external actors, the present analysis focuses specifically on the impact of EU-level discourse. Officeholders, on the other hand, are typically more reticent: they emulate EU discourses to a lesser extent, and when they do, they prefer to use formulaic language that signals compliance with norm reproduction but can sometimes decouple the rhetoric from actual policies.

Nevertheless, EU “links” (regular intragovernmental meetings, commissions, and mid-level bureaucratic cooperation) and “leverages” (economic assistance packages and foreign policy support) do promote democratic norms, eventually bending official discourse toward common elements. In a final account, officials in the EaP corral themselves into the **iron cage of democracy discourse**: by paying lip service to democratic principles, they gradually establish and reify them as a policy foundation. Or, put differently, the longer officials instrumentalize the democracy discourse to legitimise their power, the more tangible changes in accordance with democratic principles they have to implement to remain legitimate. Pro-democratic reforms in Ukraine after 2014 and in Armenia after 2018 (e.g., the installation of anti-corruption infrastructure, political decentralization, the consolidation of the electoral system, or the liberalization of the media) would have been more arduous if Ukrainian and Armenian establishments had not adopted the democracy discourse. After all, civil society’s push for further democratization is bound to become more resolute when the regime at least talks about democratic values, thus providing a necessary common ground between democracy promoters and officials, a ground on which further details will be negotiated. And vice versa, there is a correlation between a regime’s rejection of democratic discourse and authoritarian consolidation, as exemplified by the Belarusian case.

However, behind the shared results that testify to the EU’s ability to promote democratic norms, the study’s three cases offer a picture that emphasizes the importance of national and international contexts. Each case reveals some unique dynamics.

Table 1: Cross-Case Expectation Evaluation

Expectation	Ukraine	Belarus	Armenia
E1: In the context of EaP democracy discourse, EU symbolic elites act as norm-setters, while Armenian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian actors act as norm-recipients.	corroborated	corroborated	corroborated
E2: As a result of the EU democratic support activities, clusters of civil society actors that replicate EU democracy discourses emerge in Armenia, Belarus and Ukraine.	corroborated	corroborated	corroborated
E3: Across the EaP, official discourse is not expected to replicate EU democracy discourse but rather to either adapt or reject it.	corroborated (adaptation)	corroborated (rejection)	corroborated (adaptation)
E4: In the aftermath of global challenges, the discourses of national actors across Armenia, Belarus and Ukraine are expected to converge more closely with EU discourses.	unconfirmed	unconfirmed	corroborated

Ukraine, a country that cultivates ties with the EU longer and more consistently than Armenia and Belarus, appears to be a laboratory of discursive experimentation: both societal and official discourses have introduced novel elements into the definition of democracy. Societal discourse includes issues ranging from equal *educational opportunities for displaced populations e-governance* as constituents of democracy. Admittedly, by doing so, NGOs reflect the challenges and opportunities faced by Ukrainian society; however, in a larger sense, such innovations open new vistas for understanding which issues societies outside the EU core deem amenable to democracy. In parallel, the most essential innovation offered by the Ukrainian official discourse is the reinterpretation of democracy as an instrument to bolster national security. Whereas EU institutions have traditionally framed democracy as a peacebuilding device — emphasizing democratic peace and conflict-resolution as substitutes for hard power — Ukrainian discourse securitizes democracy, conceptualizing it instead as a regime type capable of producing political systems with enhanced military capacities and stronger foreign alliances. Once again, this interpretative turn reflects the acute challenges Ukraine has faced since 2014. Yet, given the general trends of destabilization of the liberal IR system, the accumulation of national security crises worldwide, and the EU's refocusing on core security issues, *discursive securitization of democracy* might be an element appropriate for further diffusion. One way or another, Ukraine's **revised democracy discourse** invites reflections on the possibilities of a proper dialogue between the EU and non-EU symbolic elites about updated meanings of democracy, a dialogue able to overcome the ritualistic exchanges of talking points. Such a dialogue should not only facilitate democratization of the EaP but also ensure that democracy remains far from obsolete and continues to “make sense” for citizens and elites inside the EU as well.

Belarus epitomizes the perils of **discursive insulation**. Due to gradual autocratic consolidation, the regime eventually succeeded in erecting a barrier that considerably hindered norm diffusion. In particular, it either suppressed or exiled pro-democratic NGOs, simultaneously limiting Belarus' cooperation with the EU, which severed “links and leverage” the Union might have resorted to. Such insulation had a double effect on the discourse on democracy in Belarus. Societal discourse, unable to develop freely through public discussion, devolved into a tunnel vision that faithfully reproduces tropes of the liberal component borrowed from the EU book, but is unable to effectively communicate with the Belarusian society or international partners beyond that. The point is: however meaningful and valuable the liberal component is, *right to the integrity of the person or safety of journalists* is likely to rank low among the average citizen's concerns. There must be other topics and ideas, either adopted from the EU democracy playbook or invented outright, to realign this citizen's views with democracy. A tragic inability to do so, currently manifest in Belarusian societal discourse, is one of the factors contributing to the weakness of pro-democracy movements. As for the official

discourse, it benefited from the normative insulation because it found an opportunity to graduate to the topic reversal strategy: a considerable part of discussion of democracy by Belarusian officials is an exercise in denial – denial of essential parts of the EU codebook, denial that democracy is conducive for peaceful conflict resolution, able to protect minorities, capable to ensure economic growth etc. Undoubtedly, these tactics have long been staples in the autocrat’s playbook; yet they only gain traction when society remains unexposed to alternatives. An absence of an effective dialogue between Belarusian civil society and the regime, on the one hand, and the EU, on the other, virtually brought norm diffusion to a halt.

As for Armenia, it stands as an example of **accelerated convergence**. Until 2018, the country remained mired in the grey zone between autocracy and democracy; since then, it has graduated to electoral democracy and remains there. Both societal and official discourses reflected this turning point in discursive terms: references to democratic components, their relative importance, and topical elements of the codebook realigned with those of the EU over time. Just as in the two other cases, some familiar variations appear: societal discourse tends to enhance, while the official discourse aims to domesticate the EU democracy discourse; overall, both reproduce it with considerable fidelity.

Unlike Belarus and Ukraine, the Armenian case corroborates E4, for we observe further realignment after the country faced its geopolitical challenge. There are several possible explanations for this outcome. First, it is possible that “Armenian realignment” is, in fact, an outcome of the metamorphosis of the European discourse following a geopolitical challenge. Notably, after 2022, the European symbolic elites began referring to electoral components less frequently, a change that brought the EU and Armenian discourse (which evolved in the same direction) closer together. This, however, fails to account for the lack of similar changes in Ukrainian or Belarusian discourses. Second, it is plausible that the expected convergence dynamics require more time – for the EU to reformulate new tropes and for EaP countries to grasp them and perform discourse realignment – which simply has not happened yet. Third, the nature of the geopolitical challenges faced by the EU, Armenia, Ukraine, and Belarus is qualitatively different: while the EU and Armenia faced strategic challenges, Ukraine faces an existential threat, and Belarus was covertly occupied. It is not inconceivable that different geopolitical challenges have different discursive repercussions. Third, it is possible that the assumptions behind the E4 were faulty: the links between geopolitical events and discursive alterations might be inextant; apart from a general pledge to uphold democratic norms, each country conceives them individually, and the pressure for realignment is all but a happenstance. Finally, we might have failed to consistently observe the geopolitical challenge effect due to methodological design: an expectation is accepted or rejected based on combination of qualitative and quantitative evidence, which is error-prone, especially with small samples. Further research with larger N are required. Whatever the reason, since this study has failed to produce sufficient evidence to corroborate E4, we are obliged to acknowledge that although the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, there is not enough proof to allege that strategic challenges promote further discourse convergence as a general trend.

Conclusions

Having performed cross-country comparative discourse analysis this study reveals that while the European Union maintains a coherent and hegemonic narrative of democracy, its diffusion across the Eastern Partnership countries is uneven and remains deeply embedded in local political contexts. The study underscores that symbolic elites – whether state officials or societal actors – rarely absorb EU norms passively but engage in complex processes of replication, adaptation, or rejection shaped by geopolitical pressures, institutional incentives, and identity politics.

Three key implications emerge:

1. **Shared political framework does not guarantee discursive convergence.** While the Eastern Partnership framework implies a shared trajectory toward democratic consolidation, the cross-country comparative discourse analysis suggests that proximity to the EU or formal cooperation agreements do not automatically translate into discursive norm alignment. Ukraine, despite its aspirations to join the EU and rather extensive engagement, exhibits selective adaptation, with

official discourse occasionally downplaying democratic themes in favor of security or national unity narratives. Armenia shows promising convergence, particularly after 2023, which recalibrated its strategic orientation; however, the durability of this effect remains to be observed. Finally, Belarus demonstrates active resistance, with official rhetoric often portraying democracy as destabilizing or foreign-imposed. In other words, there are notable country-dependent variations which invites to question the empirical validity and strategic utility to lump countries that differ linguistically, culturally, and politically together in construct of “Eastern Partnership.” This paper strongly suggests that democracy promotion is not merely a matter of political outreach or externally-imposed framework but a kind of a discursive negotiation. Success depends on understanding how democracy is linguistically framed, symbolically contested, and culturally embedded in each national context. Thus, tailored discursive engagement strategies are essential to avoid misalignment and unintended resistance.

2. **Civil society organisations act as discursive strategists.** The study highlights the pivotal role of NGOs and think tanks as impactful agents of discursive replication and norm diffusion. By aligning with EU norms, these actors gain symbolic capital that enhances their visibility, credibility, and leverage, especially in contexts where state institutions are resistant or authoritarian. Moreover, their discourse often serves as a counterweight to official narratives, fostering democratic resilience from below. However, these actors do not merely echo EU discourse; they strategically mobilize it to legitimise their own agendas, challenge domestic power structures, and secure access to transnational resources. In Ukraine and Armenia, for instance, civil society groups often adopt EU language to frame their demands for transparency, rule of law, and institutional accountability, positioning themselves as credible interlocutors in both domestic and European arenas. Practicing discursive entrepreneurship, civil society organisations interpose themselves as valuable though autonomous actors able to promote democracy in the region – an they should be dealt accordingly.

3. **Democratic discourse establishes an iron cage for officials, but it is imperative to distinguish strategic compliance and genuine acceptance.** The study reveals that democratic discourse as framed by the EU can function as an “iron cage,” a normative structure that actors feel compelled to enter in order to gain legitimacy, resources, or geopolitical favor. In other words, EU-aligned discourse becomes a formalised expectation in the Eastern Partnership, especially for state officials and institutions seeking recognition or support. However, entry into this discursive space does not guarantee substantive commitment to democratic principles. The strategic deployment of democratic language often serves to signalise compliance rather than enact meaningful transformation. This performativity creates a discursive façade that may obscure undemocratic practices or stave off meaningful reform. Understanding this dynamic is essential for distinguishing between rhetorical alignment and genuine norm internalisation. It requires not only textual analysis but also attention to context, actor positioning, and the consistency between discourse and institutional behaviour.

Based on the findings, we propose the following policy recommendations:

1. **Support local discursive innovations as forms of democratic ownership.** It is advisable to encourage and legitimise locally rooted expressions of democratic values – even when they diverge from EU templates, so long as they align with core democratic components. This may involve funding creative civic campaigns, supporting culturally resonant messaging, or amplifying grassroots voices. After all, *democracy is more resilient when it is indigenized. Valuing local discursive agency fosters ownership, sustainability, and deeper societal buy-in.*
2. **Establish platforms for transnational discursive exchanges.** It is desirable to create structured forums, both virtual and in-person, where symbolic elites from the EU and the EaP countries should have opportunities to cooperatively develop democratic narratives, share discursive innovations, and reflect on local adaptations. These platforms should include not only policymakers but also societal actors, academics, and journalists. All in all, *discursive convergence*

is more likely when actors co-construct meaning rather than receive it top-down. Dialogue fosters mutual understanding and reduces the risk of norm misalignment or rejection.

3. **Create tools to differentiate between discursive compliance and genuine commitment.** EU institutions should develop tools and frameworks that assess not just the presence of democratic language, but its strategic use and alignment with institutional behaviour. This might include longitudinal discourse tracking, actor mapping, and cross-referencing rhetoric with policy implementation. All in all, *officials may adopt EU discourse strategically without committing to its principles. Identifying this gap allows for more targeted and effective democracy support.*

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