REDEMOS

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

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Funding practices, variegated conceptions of funding categories, and implications on democracy support research

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Executive Summary

The European Union (EU) has been a central actor in promoting democracy in its Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) for more than two decades, yet recent geopolitical shifts—most notably Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—have fundamentally reshaped the landscape in which these efforts unfold. This working paper examines EU democracy funding practices in the EN, compares them with those of other bilateral and multilateral donors, and reflects on how differing conceptions of democracy shape donor engagement. It also considers the relevance of the EU's emerging focus on *"democratic resilience"* and *"geopolitical actorness"* for the future of its democracy support, as well as that, exercised by its member states and other bilateral and multilateral donors, engaged in promoting democracy in the EN region.

Key findings:

- **Varied donor profiles.** EU funding has been broad but often concentrated on the **peacebuilding** and **liberal** models, whereas member states show stronger emphasis on **feminist** and **egalitarian** models, and international organisations **prioritise socio-economic resilience**. U.S. assistance displays similarities with EU support but retains distinct focus areas.
- **Conceptual pluralism.** Donor support to democracy is underpinned by different, sometimes contested, understandings of democracy. This generates *conceptual* and *methodological* challenges for comparative research and makes cumulative knowledge-building difficult.
- **Temporal horizons.** EU and donor projects often operate on *short- to medium-term cycles*. Such limited time horizons constrain the capacity to address structural democratic weaknesses and reduce resilience to authoritarian pushback.
- **Domestic contexts matter.** The effectiveness of donor interventions is shaped by the political landscapes of recipient countries, where regime type, societal openness, and wartime realities influence the uptake of democracy assistance. Political trajectories of EN countries strongly shape the effectiveness of democracy support. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and authoritarian entrenchment in Belarus and parts of the South Caucasus further constrain democratic openings.

Implications for EU policy and research:

- A stronger alignment between democracy support and the EU's emerging discourse on **democratic resilience** is needed, ensuring that funding goes beyond institutional reforms and addresses societal-level vulnerabilities.
- The EU's self-perception as a **geopolitical actor** requires democracy promotion to be more explicitly connected to broader foreign policy goals while avoiding instrumentalisation that could undermine credibility.
- Researchers must account for **variation in concepts, reflected in funding categories, and practices of democracy** and develop comparative frameworks that can bridge these differences.
- Policy evaluations should move beyond input–output logics and integrate **time horizons** and **contextual factors** into assessments of effectiveness.

Conclusion:

The EU's democracy support in the EN faces mounting challenges from both *authoritarian resilience* and global geopolitical competition. However, by refining its funding practices, aligning *democracy promotion* with *democratic resilience*, and engaging in conceptually robust research, the EU can strengthen its credibility and effectiveness as a democracy supporter.

Democracy support in the EN region remains both crucial and contested. To remain effective, the EU and other donors must refine their practices by **integrating resilience thinking**, extending temporal perspectives, and adopting more **context-sensitive approaches**. For researchers, the task lies in **addressing conceptual ambiguity** and methodological challenges to generate knowledge that can meaningfully inform policy and practice.

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List of Abbreviations

ALDA – European Association for Local Democracy
CEPA – EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement
CRS – (OECD) Creditor Reporting System
EEAS – European Union External Action Service
EED – European Endowment for Democracy
EN – Eastern Neighbourhood
ENI - European Neighbourhood Instrument
ENP – European Neighbourhood Policy
EUAM – EU Advisory Mission for Ukraine
EUBAM – EU Border Assistance Mission for Moldova and Ukraine
EUGS – EU Global Strategy
EUMM – EU Military Mission Georgia
FIMI – Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference
HACC – High Anti-Corruption Court of Ukraine
IATI - International Aid Transparency Initiative
NABU – National Anticorruption Bureau of Ukraine
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
ODA – Official Development Assistance
OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SAPO – Specialised Anticorruption Prosecutor Office
U.N. – United Nations
USA – United States
USAID - U.S. Agency for International Development Cooperation

Introduction

It has been over twenty years since the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) gave rise to the EU's democracy promotion activities in six countries of the region, namely Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In 2009, these countries became part of the EU's Eastern Partnership - a joint initiative aimed at deepening political association and economic integration between the Union and Eastern Neighbourhood (EN). Since then, both the geopolitical dynamics in the region and internal political developments in EN countries have changed dramatically. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a critical juncture, cementing pre-existing divergences in the political development trajectories of Eastern Neighbourhood countries and giving rise to new ones.

Whilst Ukraine and Moldova are closer to EU membership than ever through ongoing accession negotiations, Georgia's accession process is *de facto* halted due to the political trajectory of its current government. Armenia and Azerbaijan are navigating complex wartime realities while maintaining ties with both the EU and Russia, and Belarus remains the most challenging case, with the regime increasingly aligned with Moscow, and civil society in exile being the central counterpart to EU democracy promotion efforts. Promoting democracy in such a volatile and complex context as the EN region thus requires not only continuous insight into ongoing dynamics but also a **past-informed approach** - leveraging previously identified best practices while consciously avoiding the repetition of past policy failures. This need increases the relevance of research on various aspects of EU democracy funding and its interplay with relevant efforts of other donors. The latter is particularly relevant given the EU's need to adapt to recent shifts in U.S. foreign policy, including the shutdown of democracy promotion programmes previously supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development Cooperation (USAID) (Repucci and Zselyke 2025).

To respond to these needs, this working paper examines the findings of Work Package (WP) 3 on the substance as well as the key patterns and trends of EU democracy funding in the EN region between 2005 and 2022, with particular attention to their implications for EU democracy-promotion practice and research. Its core analytical question is: *which patterns and trends in EU democracy funding in the EN region—reflected in the evolution of funding categories and in the practices of channelling support—can be identified, and what do they reveal about the EU's approach to democracy promotion, both in practice and in scholarly research?* Notably, for the purposes of this paper, the concepts of funding categories and funding practices are treated as closely interrelated: funding categories delineate the substantive areas in which democracy support is allocated, while funding practices capture the mechanisms, channels, and procedures through which this support is delivered.

With regard to *practice of providing democracy support*, the focus lies primarily on the relevance of external democracy funding considering intra-EU political developments and the evolving understanding of democracy within the Union, alongside the EU's ambitions for strengthening its geopolitical leverage in the volatile EN region. This section engages in particular with the concepts of EU democratic resilience and geopolitical actorness, to a significant extent shaping contemporary EU policy debates. The section addressing what the process and results under WP 3 *contributes to democracy support research* discusses the ontological and methodological challenges of researching democracy funding, where possible, suggesting the ways they can be mitigated.

Conceptually, the analysis is based on the mapping of the substance of democracy, as suggested by Freyburg, et al (2024, 11). This mapping distinguishes six democracy promotion models, namely electoral, liberal, participatory, egalitarian, peacebuilding and feminist. It also considers assistance for good governance, human rights, the rule of law and gender equality as concepts closely related to democracy, and that are often included in democracy assistance projects. Throughout WP3, this mapping was used to operationalise democracy assistance projects in the EN region according to six distinct models of democracy, "thereby aggregating the highly disaggregated Official Development Assistance (ODA) purpose codes into categories that reflect the specific indicators uniquely captured by each model" (Ibid).

Empirically, the paper draws on the dataset of democracy assistance to the EU's EN countries, compiled by the REDEMOS project. The dataset is based on financial flow data reported as part of ODA by the European Commission to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for the period

between 2005 to 2022. It comprises 1,474 entries, including 222 projects funded by the European Commission, 646 by EU member states, 416 by the United States, and 155 by international organizations (Vlasenko and Freyburg, 2024). The remaining entries pertain to projects financed by third countries such as Australia, Canada, and Israel, which were excluded from the analysis. The total amount of aid included in the analysis amounts to USD 503.3 million. Of this, USD 184.25 million was provided by EU institutions, USD 146.62 million by EU member states, USD 139.07 million by the United States, USD 26.33 million by international organisations, and USD 7.03 million by non-EU countries.

The dataset 3.2. originates in the Official Development Assistance (ODA) data, which is tracked and monitored by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The dataset includes operationalization of democracy assistance according to the six models (electoral, liberal, participatory, egalitarian, peacebuilding, and feminist) by aggregating the highly disaggregated ODA purpose codes according to the indicators that each of the models exclusively captures.

Development finance data are collected using a single file format (Creditor Reporting System – CRS) to report at item level on all flows of resources to countries of Eastern Neighborhood (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). Item-level reporting is validated against key aggregates also reported by donors and then serves as the basis for producing various other aggregate statistics.The new dataset allows others to adapt the publicly available data from the OECD (https://stats.oecd.org) to suit their own ideas of what constitutes democracy support. More detailed information about how the dataset was developed is available in the REDEMOS conceptual paper D 3.1 (Freyburg et al., 2024).

In the section related to *EU democracy support practice*, **the paper highlights the growing relevance of the concept of democratic resilience for designing and evaluating EU democracy support activities and allocating funding to them in the EN region**. As external conditions grow increasingly volatile and connections between external and internal challengers to democracy continue to emerge and solidify, it becomes essential not only to design and implement context-sensitive projects, but also to ensure their long-term impact. This determines the relevance for the EU to go beyond the external incentives model (Mesarovich and Schumacher 2025) and establish sustainable *democratic collaboration* with like-minded government and non-government actors in EN countries with a view to jointly countering internal and external threats to democracy, as well as promote sector-wide support in the EU's approach for building resilient institutional frameworks in partner countries.

The paper also contends that, in contrast to frequent juxtapositions in existing scholarship, EU's quest for becoming a stronger geopolitical actor in the region does not and should not meet abandoning normative ideas. In so doing, it comes back to the idea of *resilience*, introduced to EU foreign policy discourse by the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016 (EEAS 2016), framing it as a conceptual bridge between the normative and geopolitical facets of EU power. It is also argued that relinquishing the EU's commitment to its core values would mean abandoning what has made the Union distinct among geopolitical competitors and would undermine its credibility in the eyes of partners in the EN region and beyond. That is why, normative continuity can and should be an important part of the EU's democratic resilience – both at home and in its external activities.

In this light, **the termination of most USAID projects can be viewed both as a challenge and an opportunity for EU democracy support** in the region. Although the EU cannot engage with every stakeholder previously connected to USAID, nor replicate each individual project, USAID's withdrawal offers an opportunity for the EU to strategically reassess its priorities, deepen partnerships with selected actors, and expand its influence in areas aligned with its values and long-term interests. In other words, by observing how NGOs are coping under the stress test of USAID's withdrawal, the EU gains a valuable opportunity to allocate funding to the most promising of them, thus (re)shaping the democracy promotion landscape in partner countries.

In the section related to *EU democracy support research,* t**he paper stresses the enduring and profound nature the presence of variegated concepts of democracy poses to research on democracy support.** This variation constitutes an ontological challenge to the field, complicating the comparability of findings in both quantitative and qualitative, and cannot be avoided, as they are inextricably linked to the "essentially contested" nature of the democracy concept. Nonetheless, attention to the substance of the concept and a

clear mapping of its variations can enhance the analytical rigor of research on democracy support, generally, and democracy funding, more specifically.

Another important challenge to research on democracy support lies in the differing time horizons of donor-supported projects and initiatives. Variations in projects' timing and scale complicate both the assessment of outcomes and the attribution of impact, as well as lead to the fragmentation of data - a challenge the REDEMOS team encountered when working with OECD data. Clear standards on reporting of democracy funding, coupled with longitudinal research projects capable of capturing delayed or cumulative effects, are essential for generating more reliable, comparable, and policy-relevant insights.

We also show that significant shifts in domestic political landscapes give rise to both ontological and methodological challenges for democracy support research. Ontologically, these shifts complicate how democracy itself is understood and operationalised, as well as constitute a challenge to attributing effects and impact to specific democracy promotion efforts. Methodologically, such changes disrupt data collection, affect the stability of research contexts, and challenge the comparability of findings over time, requiring more adaptive and context-sensitive research designs.

The same challenges arise in the context of sudden geopolitical shifts, which can rapidly alter both the conditions for democracy support and the frameworks through which its outcomes are analysed. Considering such risks and exploring ways to mitigate them is therefore increasingly important for research projects on democracy support.

The remainder of the study is structured as follows. First, it provides a brief overview of REDEMOS WP 3 findings regarding the substance, patterns, and trends of EU democracy funding in the EN region, including a comparison with funding provided by EU member states, the USA, and international organisations. The second part discusses these findings in the context of the practice of EU democracy support, focusing on the emerging concepts of democratic resilience and geopolitical actorness. Where relevant, insights are also drawn for democracy promotion practice, as exercised by EU member states and international organisations. The third part explores ontological and methodological obstacles to democracy support research based on REDEMOS team's experience of researching democracy funding by the EU, member states and international organisations in the EN region.

1. Democracy funding in the EN region. EU funding categories compared to those of other bilateral and multilateral donors

As demonstrated by the REDEMOS dataset on EU democracy funding (D 3.2) (Freyburg and Vlasenko 2024), the initial empirical analysis of the collected data (D 3.1) (Freyburg, et al. 2024), and the subsequent in-depth, policy-oriented analysis (Rabinovych and Kimmel 2025), the EU emerged as a key donor supporting democracy in the EN region during the period under review. This section provides a brief overview of how these funds were allocated and utilised by the EU, with comparisons to funding channeled by EU member states, international organisations, and the United States - then a major bilateral donor actively engaged in the region.

1.1 EU democracy funding in the EN region

Overall, during the analysed period, EU assistance demonstrated a dramatic increase from USD 159,137 in 2005 to over USD 13 million in 2022. This upward trend, however, was not consistent, with assistance fluctuating over the years depending on domestic conditions in partner countries, shifting EU priorities, and broader geopolitical developments.

Throughout the period under study, **Georgia was the largest recipient of EU assistance**, receiving USD 87.729 million - or 47.6% of all EU democracy assistance to EN countries. A key factor behind Georgia's leading position - compared to Ukraine, which ultimately ranked second with USD 59.25 million (32%) - lies in the classification of aid: while support for the EUMM Georgia mission was categorised as democracy assistance, similar support for the EUAM and EUBAM missions in Ukraine was not. As highlighted in D 3.3, this discrepancy reflects gaps in reporting practices (Rabinovych and Kimmel 2025).

Our mapping of assistance, based on the distinct democracy models developed by Freyburg et al. (2024), revealed the **prominence of the peacebuilding model in the substance of EU support to EN countries.** This model accounted for USD 83.68 million - or 45.4% - of all EU democracy support funding in the region. As with Georgia's position as a key recipient, the dominance of the peacebuilding model can be attributed to the substantial share of funds the EU allocated to the EUMM mission. In addition to supporting civilian peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and security sector reform under this model, **significant portions of EU assistance were also directed toward the liberal and egalitarian democracy models**, amounting to USD 36.699 million (19.9%) and USD 31.84 million (17.2%), respectively. Important priorities under the liberal model were, *inter alia*, rule of law (often focused on anti-corruption and judicial system reform – particularly in Ukraine) and human rights, while the egalitarian model emphasises support for social services and employment creation across all EN countries. Less attention was devoted to building participatory democratic structures, with the participatory model accounting for 13.2% of EU democracy assistance, while the feminist and electoral democracy models each received just over 2%.

In contrast to analyses focused solely on the amounts of funding and their distribution among recipients and across models, the results of quantitative text analysis of project titles reveal the **diversity and multifaceted nature of EU support to EN countries**. This is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows that the EU has devoted considerable attention to civil society, societal development, and individual rights, reflecting its normative agenda and commitment to democratic values. Rather than focusing solely on institutions' capacity-building or economic reform, the EU thus concentrated on societal resilience, also including an emphasis on its local dimension.

Figure 1: Top 20 words in the titles of EU-funded projects (2005-2022)

1.2 EU member states' democracy funding in the EN region

Over the period under study, **EU member states were the second most important collective provider of democracy assistance in the region**. The total value of their democracy assistance to EN countries accounted for USD 146.62 million, which is 24% less than the respective EU assistance, analysed above. Also quite uneven, the dynamics of EU member states' assistance had been similar to that of the EU with a dramatic increase from USD 231.199 in 2005 to over USD 11.6 million in 2022.

In contrast to EU assistance, **key recipient of democracy funding from EU member states was Ukraine**, with USD 71.9 million or almost a half of their total assistance. Ukraine received assistance from almost all EU member states, with Germany (USD 28.39 million), Sweden (USD 18.37 million) and Denmark (USD 8.42 million) being the key bilateral donors to the country – particularly active after Russia's annexation of Crimea and start of its aggression in Donbas in 2014. Receiving over 60% less than Ukraine, Moldova was the second most important recipient of assistance from EU member states, provided foremost by Sweden (USD 9.2 million), followed by the UK (USD 7.79 million) and Germany (USD 4.3 million). Whilst Belarus and Georgia received comparable amounts of USD 18.89 million and USD 17.8 million, assistance to Armenia constituted USD 5.08 million, and Azerbaijan received only slightly more than USD 1 million – 70 times less than Ukraine.

Whilst EU assistance primarily revolved around funding categories focused on peacebuilding, member states' assistance was dominated by the liberal model (USD 48.5 million / 34.6%), indicating a strong emphasis on legal and judicial development, as well as the promotion of human rights across the region. The two subsequently prioritised models were the **participatory** (USD 37.9 million / 27%) and the **egalitarian** (USD 26.47 million / 18%), reflecting member states' commitment to fostering civic engagement, inclusive governance, and social equity as key pillars of their support to EN countries. An important difference from EU assistance lies in **member states' considerably stronger focus on the feminist model** - and thus women's rights, including ending of violence *vis-à-vis* women and girls - than that of the EU. Similar, however, is the **limited emphasis on the electoral model**, with both the EU and member states showing relatively little immediate engagement with electoral processes and institutions in EN countries. This reflects both the sensitivity of the electoral domain, being closely tied to national sovereignty - and, as is also characteristic of the EU, the breadth and multifacetedness of member states' understanding of democracy, which extends beyond elections to encompass rule of law, human rights and viable civil society. Even more prominently than in the case of the EU, this is illustrated in Figure 2 through our quantitative analysis of the titles of

member state-funded projects, which frequently reference terms such as “rights,” “civil society,” “women,” “children,” “education,” and “media.”

Figure 2: Top 20 words in the titles of projects, funded by EU member states (2005-2022)

1.3 Democracy funding by international organisations in the EN region

Compared to the funding provided by the EU and its member states, the democracy assistance delivered by international organisations (e.g. International Development Association, U.N. agencies) to EN countries between 2005 and 2022, registered in the OECD Library under the relevant codes, is significantly lower, totaling only USD 26.33 million.

In contrast to EU and member state funding, support from international institutions for EN countries has not exhibited a clear upward trend over the past decade, even despite turbulent developments in the region, such as Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its aggression in Eastern Ukraine.

The funding through international organisations was also different from that, provided by the EU and member states, by recipients. While the latter concentrated predominantly on Ukraine and Georgia, funding from international institutions was predominantly directed toward **Moldova** (USD 10.12 million) and **Azerbaijan** (USD 9.36 million).

Furthermore, in contrast to EU and member states’ assistance, that by international organisations demonstrated a stronger inclination toward the **egalitarian model and thus addressing socio-economic issues**, e.g. related to employment creation and the improvement of social services. This is visible both through the analysis of funding structure (where the respective model accounted for 61.2 percent) and quantitative text analysis of project titles, as shown by Figure 3.

Figure 3: Top 20 words in the titles of projects, funded by international organisations (2005-2022)

1.4 U.S. democracy funding in the EN region

The U.S. was the largest bilateral donor to EN countries over the studied period, providing a total of USD 139.07 million in democracy assistance. This amount was 25% less than the total assistance provided by the EU as an institution, and only 5% less than the combined contributions of EU member states.

In contrast to EU and EU member states' assistance, which - despite some fluctuations - showed significant growth since 2005, U.S. assistance remained relatively steady, with only occasional peaks (e.g., multiple participatory projects for Ukraine in 2020).

As well as in case of EU member states, Ukraine **was the largest recipient of assistance from the U.S.,** with the total amount of received assistance constituting USD 49.84 million or slightly over 35 percent of the whole assistance amounts between 2005 and 2022. No significant changes in U. S. assistance to EN were registered during the 2014-15 events in Ukraine. Assistance to Ukraine was followed by that to Georgia (USD 24.5 million) and Azerbaijan (USD 22.5 million). In contrast to assistance from the EU and its member states, U.S. assistance targeted Moldova and Belarus to a lesser extent.

Another noticeable difference from EU and member states' assistance is the strong focus of U.S. aid on **participatory democracy projects**, which accounted for USD 68 million, or 48.9 percent of all U.S. assistance. This emphasis meant that U.S. support largely targeted subnational entities and civil society organisations in partner countries. The liberal democracy model came second - similarly to the EU - with USD 33.6 million (24.1%). Within this model, it is also important to note that "media and flow of information" was a significant direction of U.S. aid. This helps explain the considerable implications that the termination of USAID projects has had on the non-governmental sector and media in EN countries (e.g. ALDA 2025; Buziashvili and Olari 2025).

While the funding-based analysis shows that the EU primarily focused on peacebuilding and the U.S. on the participatory model, quantitative text analysis reveals that the thematic focus of their assistance is quite similar. As demonstrated through Figure 4 below, similarly to the EU, the U.S. placed considerable emphasis on civil society and subnational development.

Figure 4: Top 20 words in the titles of U.S.-funded projects (2005-2022)

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In sum, the overview of EU assistance reveals both a considerable increase since the early years following the launch of the ENP and the multifaceted nature of the priorities and directions the EU has pursued in its support. Similar to the EU, member states' assistance to EN countries increased significantly after Russia demonstrated greater assertiveness in the region by annexing Crimea and launching hybrid aggression in Donbas. As this trend is not reflected in the assistance provided by the U.S. or international organisations, the increase highlights the EU and its member states' growing engagement with - and assumed responsibility for - the EN region and political processes therein.

At the same time, as discussed in more detail below in relation to the practice of EU democracy support, recent changes in the external environment - emerging after the end of the studied period - have tested the resilience and effectiveness of what the EU and its member states have achieved in terms of promoting democracy in the region. Therefore, the following section puts the trends and patterns of EU democracy assistance to EN countries in the context of emerging and interrelated debates on democratic resilience – both within the EU and in its partner countries – and EU geopolitical actorness.

2. EU democracy support to the EN: relevance and future trajectories in view of the increasing debates on EU's democratic resilience and geopolitical actorness

2.1 Increased focus on "democratic resilience" in the EU democracy debate

The noticeable shift from democracy itself to resilience of democracy or, as it is primarily referred to in scholarship, "democratic resilience" (Tirado Castro 2023) in the EU debate can be owed to several logically interrelated trends. First, in the last twenty years, the world witnessed a democratic erosion "which left no region of the world untouched" (European Democracy Hub 2024). According to data from the V-Dem Institute, in 2025 the number of autocracies surpassed that of democracies, with autocracies increasing from 88 to 91 - comprising 56 electoral autocracies and 35 closed autocracies (Nehme 2025). As increasingly more people live under autocratic rule (72% currently, with no signs of the autocratisation trend to reverse) (Ibid), the attractiveness of democracy faces growing challenges. Secondly, largely as a consequence of democratic erosion, autocratic powers have become more focused and strategic in their efforts to undermine Western democracies. Digitalization offers them a fertile ground to diversify their influence toolbox, thus increasing the EU's and its member states' vulnerability to hybrid threats and foreign interference in elections (Council of the EU 2024). Thirdly, while the EU has developed numerous tools to address such external threats - such as Hybrid Rapid Response Teams and the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) toolbox - an important challenge to intra-EU democracy is that leaders in some member states themselves gravitate towards cooperation with autocracies and contribute to intra-EU democratic backsliding. With this, democratic erosion develops from an external challenge to an intra-EU one, placing democratic resilience high on the Union's agenda.

How do the aforementioned trends and the increased focus on democratic resilience influence EU democracy promotion? In some contributions, one can already observe authors equating the growing focus on democratic resilience with a shift away from the democracy community's traditional emphasis on facilitating transitions to democracy in formerly autocratic countries or ensuring that such processes do not stall (e.g. Tirado Castro 2023). We argue that this mutually exclusive approach – predetermining inward-looking view on democratic resilience does not suit either the reality of an interconnected world, broadly speaking, and that of close political and economic interconnections between the EU and its member states, on the one hand, and EN countries, on the other hand. Moreover, as the EU, its member states and EN countries largely share the landscape of threats, ensuring democratic resilience in EN countries would contribute directly to the stability and security of the EU itself (Tocci 2020). A logical question that arises in this vein – and that we will address below deals with **the extent to which democracy promotion efforts in the region- exercised by the EU, as well as its member states and other relevant bilateral and multilateral donors in the region, between 2005 and 2022 – have targeted the objectives of democratic resilience in the region and its individual countries**. To address this question, we first return to the substance of democracy promotion models in the region and, following a brief discussion of the conceptual underpinnings of democratic resilience, examine its components considering these models, identifying those that may – conceptually - require stronger EU engagement.

Democracy can be understood and interpreted through its two dimensions, procedural and substantive. The procedural dimension stresses the importance of the minimal democracy requirements, such as free and fair elections, rule of law, and the separation of powers (Dahl 1971). The substantive dimension builds on the procedural basis, adding such characteristics as the protection of civil liberties, political pluralism, and accountable governance (Spicker 2008). Combined, these two dimensions allow Diamond (1999) to differentiate between electoral, liberal, participatory, and deliberative democracy concepts. Building on the existing research, Freyburg et al (2024) expand the typology, analyzing six models of democracy (i.e., electoral, liberal, participatory, egalitarian, feminist, and peacebuilding) in the context of the EU democracy assistance to the EN countries.

Combining the notions of "democracy" and "resilience," *democratic resilience* emerges in the literature as a complex and contested concept, often criticised for its lack of analytical coherence (e.g. Holloway and

Manwaring 2023). The study of resilience spans diverse fields such as engineering, psychology, ecology, criminology, urban planning, economics, security studies, and climate change adaptation. Although these disciplines conceptualise resilience in slightly different ways, *persistence*, *adaptation*, and *transformation* are commonly identified as its core dimensions - or, when framed as a process, as sequential elements within the resilience cycle (Dahl 1971; Duit 2016). In this vein, Bourbeau (2015) suggests the process-oriented understanding of resilience, where its different degrees are referred to as 'resilience as maintenance' ('bouncing back', return to the status quo'), 'resilience-as-marginality' (change at the margins, adaptation), and 'resilience as renewal' (transformation).

Therefore, unlike democracy itself, **democratic resilience** should be understood as an **inherently dynamic concept.** This dynamism becomes particularly evident when we ask, *"resilience of whom?"* and "*resilience to what?".* Such questions shift the focus from abstract definitions to the concrete actors and institutions at stake, while also accommodating variation in whether the referent is the state or society, and in how state institutions can most effectively engage in democratic collaboration with those of (civil) society. In this light, democratic resilience can be also understood as a **desired outcome** of donors' action in the region. The centrality of state-civil society collaboration for democratic resilience is reflected in the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2027 (EEAS 2020), which devoted special attention to the topic of democratic resilience. Interestingly, however, the document focuses almost entirely on the survival and further development of democratic institutions, even though it frames its agenda around the concept of "societies." Equally important is identifying the nature of the threats, which may range from economic crises and disinformation campaigns to populist movements, external interference, or gradual institutional erosion. Situating democratic resilience within this actor-threat nexus allows the concept to serve as an analytical tool for examining not only how democracies survive, but also how they adapt and evolve under pressure. This perspective is also relevant for both designing EU, EU member states' and other donors' democracy funding instruments and evaluating their effects, with attention to the intended addressees and to the extent to which such instruments remain pertinent within the contemporary threat landscape of a given region or country. Hereby the resilience component is of particular use for delineating which components of a certain funding instrument aim at developing absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities of a democratic system in a partner country, and which capacities may require additional, more targeted support to take root (Manca et al. 2017).

Understanding the gap between the concept of democratic resilience and its interpretation within the broader framework of EU and member states' democracy promotion - particularly the extent to which EU efforts in the EN region can be seen as fostering democratic resilience - requires a closer comparison of the substantive content of these concepts. Democratic resilience implies that both state institutions and societies - regardless of which the EU chooses to prioritise - should be able to withstand, adapt, and transform in the face of pressures and threats. Existing research offers numerous hypotheses regarding the factors that underpin such capacity. Education, media pluralism, civic engagement, and even sustained donor support are just a few among the plethora of explanatory variables, circulating in contemporary studies (Kochenov and van Wolferen 2018; Panchulidze and Youngs 2025). However, both the specific variables and the mechanisms through which they exert influence vary significantly depending on contextual particularities, such as political culture, historical legacies, institutional capacity, and the nature of prevailing threats. These contextual differences not only shape the applicability of generic resilience-building strategies but also determine whether external support, such as that provided through EU democracy promotion, can meaningfully reinforce resilience or risks misalignment with local needs.

In this paper, we suggest looking at the components of democratic resilience through the prism of the six democracy models. Prominently featured in multiple conceptual and empirical works on democratic resilience, including those focused on the EU and EN countries (e.g. Croissant and Lott 2025; Kutsenko 2025; Corman and Schumacher 2023), these components can be broadly categorised into **institutional strength, civic engagement, and societal values.** Institutional strength includes robust electoral processes, separation of powers, rule of law, and anti-corruption measures. Civic engagement consists of active civil society, inclusivity and representation, as well as political party development. Finally, societal values cover social cohesion, commitment to democratic norms domestically and peace internationally, and protection of

minority rights (including women's rights). While this list is not exhaustive, it forms a basis for analysing democratic resilience and how it overlaps with the substance of the EU's democracy promotion.

Institutional strength relies on a set of elements, which belong to our "conventional" knowledge about democratic resilience. Assessment of the transparency of the electoral processes and their outcomes is the most reliable tool to evaluate the state of democratic resilience in a country. The case of COVID 19-impacted elections across the EU provided an excellent example of the vulnerability of the electoral process to external factors and incumbents' failure to satisfy the electorate in this regard. Technocracy, populism, and plebiscitarianism pose dangers to the elections and eventually can lead to democratic decay (Guasti 2021). If democratic resilience is interpreted as an ability of democratic institutions to come back to normal after temporary deformation, elections should have returned to pre-Covid standards of transparency and fairness once the pandemic was over. Yet, Europe is still experiencing long term negative effects of this temporary crisis on its electoral processes (Chan and Kukovič 2025). Consequently, this negative effect was reflected in the EU's *ad hoc* approach to the **electoral model** of democracy in the EN region (Rabinovych and Kimmel 2025).

Separation of powers is an element of democratic resilience, most frequently mentioned in literature. For example, Merkel (2023) conceptualises it at the top level of the multi-level model of democratic resilience. Constitutional separation and balance of powers imply that all participants of the democratic process respect the boundaries set up by the prior agreements, regardless of the political needs of the day. Similarly to electoral processes, separation of powers has always been considered the essential part of democratic resilience in the EU. Yet recent studies demonstrate that, in many European liberal democracies, the executive increasingly circumvents or overrides the legislative branch through executive orders in the interest of faster decision-making and more concentrated responsibility (Diermeier et al 2021; Svolik et al 2023). While both objectives might have merit at the time of crisis, maintenance of the separation of powers is a required condition for democratic resilience in the EU. The separation of powers is not featured as a standalone priority in democracy funding of either the EU or any other donors in the region; however, it can be seen as closely interlinked with the **rule of law** - a complex concept, underlying the **liberal democracy model** and commonly encompassing both the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, as well as the regulation of extraordinary powers (Council of Europe 2016).

The rule of law has been traditionally mentioned in almost every base definition of democracy and democratic resilience. Currently, it can be safely argued that this is one of the most targeted components of democratic resilience in the EU. The rise of populism and predominance of informal institutions in de-democratization processes jeopardise the rule of law, making democracy less resilient to new political forces. In our analysis of the substance of EU democracy funding (see Section 1), the **liberal model of democracy**, emphasising the rule of law and anti-corruption, emerges as one of the best-funded approaches, ranking second in EU-level democracy funding and first in the funding by EU member states. The rule of law component is therefore central both to the concept of democratic resilience—anchored in a broader emphasis on institutional strength and informed by the EU's recent re-interpretation of the rule of law in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the rule-of-law and democracy crises in several member states—and to the substance of EU democracy funding in the EN region during the period examined.

Also central to the liberal model, **anti-corruption** efforts also represent a backbone of the institutional component of democratic resilience. Ideally, anti-corruption efforts are supposed to help the system to get back to normal after the short-term democratic backsliding. Yet, once countries recognise the need for anti-corruption measures, the academic discussion shifts from democratic resilience to democratic security (Anghel 2023; Blokker et al 2021). This shift reflects a change in emphasis: while democratic resilience focuses on a states' and societies' capacity to withstand, adapt to, and transform in the face of pressures, democratic security frames anti-corruption as a proactive defense against persistent or systemic threats that could undermine democracy in the long run. In this view, anti-corruption relates less to recovery and more to fortifying institutions against external infiltration, state capture, or democratic decay—securing the democratic system as a whole. Nevertheless, since anti-corruption is also closely linked to the rule of law architecture, we interpret it as an integral part of democratic resilience. Together with the rule of law, it lies at the intersection of democratic resilience and the **liberal model** underpinning EU and member states'

democracy funding and present – though less salient – across the funding categories other bilateral and multilateral donors to the region had focused on .

Active civil society belongs to the middle tier of the multi-level system of democratic resilience proposed by Merkel (2023). Within this framework, civil society acts as a bridge between citizens and political institutions, mediating demands, fostering participation, and holding power to account. The strength of civil society is one of the rare components within which the EU's democracy remains truly resilient. Over the last decades, the influence of domestic and international NGOs on societal affairs has significantly strengthened (Volintiru 2021). The positive trend has even led to the emergence of a new term "local democratic resilience" in the EU context, which is tightly connected with decentralization efforts across the EU. As highlighted in the aforementioned 2020-2027 EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2027, in practice, this means greater citizen involvement in decision-making, stronger community-level advocacy networks, and improved capacity to address local challenges through democratic means, even in times of broader political strain (EEAS 2020). At the same time, between 2005 and 2022, the **participatory model,** which encompasses both civil society support and decentralization, received relatively modest attention in EU democracy funding for the EN region, being overshadowed by peacebuilding and liberal-egalitarian models. In contrast, this model was central to U.S. funding, and **with the USAID shutdown, the EU may reconsider its engagement with civil society in the EN region and invest more in it.** This is particularly relevant, since civil society plays a crucial role as a watchdog, as demonstrated in July 2025 when Ukrainian civil society resisted the government's attempts to shut down anti-corruption institutions (Cameron 2025). In this context, civil society can be seen as a cross-cutting element of democratic resilience, not only preventing democratic backsliding but also safeguarding the institutional gains of reforms by holding governments accountable.

Inclusivity and representation are tightly connected with civic knowledge and education, all of which can be conceptualised as components of democratic resilience. While the existing literature considers that inclusivity and representation are required for any democracy to survive, there are multiple studies that list challenges faced by the EU member states achieving these goals (Gherghina et al 2021). This challenging nature has even prompted some authors to question whether the term "resilience" can be applied to representative democracy (Croissant and Lott 2024). Nevertheless, we identify inclusivity and representation as key elements of democratic resilience, because without them it is difficult to identify threats to the operation of a democratic system and therewith pinpoint pathways towards the institutions' legitimacy, responsiveness and adaptability. In this sense, they do not merely contribute to the stability of democracy but actively enable its capacity to evolve and respond to societal change. Inclusivity and representation are also closely linked to civil society development and the participatory model—connections that are particularly evident in the EN countries, where these dimensions have been challenged by the withdrawal of USAID, formerly a key supporter of the **participatory model**. Alongside the participatory model, inclusivity and representation align closely with the **feminist model** of democracy funding - an approach that has likewise received relatively little attention within the structure of EU democracy assistance to EN countries, yet was more salient in the democracy funding, provided by EU member states.

The development of a **robust political party system** features prominently in many definitions of democratic resilience (Holloway and Manwaring 2023). Political parties play a critical role in structuring political competition, aggregating societal interests, and ensuring the accountability of governments—functions that are essential for both the stability and adaptability of democratic regimes. While political party systems across Europe have weathered multiple shocks in recent years, including the rise of populist movements, declining party membership, and growing voter volatility, it is safe to say that proportional representation has, in many cases, helped to restore balance by mitigating extreme fragmentation and fostering coalition-building (Cox 1990). In this sense, electoral systems, notwithstanding their own challenges, such as the risk of political gridlock or disproportionate influence of small parties, have contributed to the resilience of party systems by maintaining the channels through which democratic competition and representation occur. Similar to the case of institutional strength—broadly conceived—the EU's and member states' limited engagement with the **electoral model** in its democracy funding for EN countries, likely due to the politicisation of this domain, has resulted in political parties receiving comparatively little attention. At the same time, a focus on civil society, inclusivity, and representation can be said to indirectly foster the

development of party systems, as these elements contribute to broader political participation, strengthen accountability demands, and create a more engaged electorate from which parties can draw support.

Social cohesion is a required element of social resilience, which in its turn is believed to lead to democratic resilience (Stollenwerk et al 2021). It refers to the strength of relationships, networks, and shared values within a society, and is inherently context-specific, varying not only across countries but also by thematic area—for example, economic redistribution, migration, or minority rights. This context dependence makes social cohesion one of the most challenging elements both to achieve in practice and to measure in theory (Janmaat 2021). High levels of social cohesion can facilitate collective action, reduce polarisation, and strengthen societal capacity to respond to crises; conversely, its shortage can exacerbate divisions, weaken democratic legitimacy, and make institutions more vulnerable to destabilising pressures – typical threats to be addressed. In our view, social cohesion should be closely connected with trust in democratic institutions, as many behavioral studies show that these two concepts are tightly linked to each other (Andrews et al 2014). In the context of democratic resilience, this interplay suggests that fostering social cohesion is not merely a social policy goal but an essential strategy for safeguarding democratic stability and adaptability. The social cohesion aspect is addressed by several models of assistance, as provided by the EU, member states and international organisations, yet through diverse avenues: the **participatory model**, by opening channels for participation and engagement; the **liberal model** through the support of independent media and high standards of journalism; the **egalitarian model**, by fostering economic equality and reducing structural barriers, as well as the **feminist model**, by focusing specifically on women's rights, representation, and participation. The specific emphases have, nevertheless, differed, as illustrated by the fact that liberal and feminist priorities have been more prominent in funding provided by member states, whereas egalitarian priorities have been more characteristic of international organisations.

Commitment to democratic norms constitutes another foundational element of democratic resilience. The mechanism behind their connection rests on the premise that a widespread normative belief in democracy positively influences a regime's ability to "bounce back" after episodes of temporary backsliding. Without such a shared commitment, political actors, whether in government, opposition, or civil society, have little incentive to engage in the often costly and uncertain process of democratic restoration. In other words, democratic institutions are more likely to recover when both elites and citizens regard democracy as the only legitimate form of governance, even in times of crisis. Lührmann (2021) provides empirical evidence showing that the level of commitment to democratic norms can explain why some countries demonstrate democratic resilience while others fail to do so. This finding underscores the role of political culture and shared values as enabling conditions for resilience, suggesting that institutional design and external support alone are insufficient without a deeply rooted normative foundation. In the context of EU democracy promotion, strengthening this normative commitment may require long-term investment in civic education, public deliberation, and the protection of pluralistic political discourse. Similarly to social cohesion, 2005-2022 data shows that the promotion of such a commitment happens at the intersection of the **liberal model** (through its aforementioned focus on the support of independent media and high standards of journalism); the **participatory model** (whereby civil society support typically includes support for civil society initiatives) and the **feminist model** (through its emphasis on inclusive representation, equal rights, gender equality, and participation of underrepresented groups). As discussed in Section 1, the funding categories associated with these models have been salient in the democracy-support portfolios of both the EU and its member states—although liberal and feminist orientations appear more prominent in member-state funding than in EU-level allocations.

Protection of **minority rights** is included here as an element of democratic resilience, as it can serve as a powerful safeguard for democracy in the face of substantial backsliding (Paciello 2017). This is particularly relevant in Eastern Europe, where the mobilisation of ethnic minorities has, in certain contexts, had positive effects on sustaining democratic practices and countering authoritarian tendencies (Rovny 2023). In the context of EU assistance to EN countries, the protection of minority rights is also addressed at the intersection of several models, namely the **liberal model**, central to EU and member states' action and explicitly including human rights protection; the **participatory model** with its objective of fostering inclusivity and representation, and the **feminist model** (although women are not a minority in the EN countries, they

can still be considered an underrepresented group that often faces challenges similar to those experienced by minorities).

In summary, there is considerable **conceptual synergy** between the substance of democratic resilience and the democracy-related funding provided by the EU, its member states, international organisations, and third states such as the United States to countries in the EN region. As illustrated in Table 1 below, each of the models of EU democracy funding has the potential to contribute to various aspects of democratic resilience, as confirmed by empirical examples from the EN region. This way, EU democracy models can be seen as pathways towards achieving the ideals of democratic resilience.

Table 1: Models of Democracy and Democratic Resilience

Model of Democracy	How the Model Supports Democratic Resilience	Examples from the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood
Electoral	• Ensures regular, free, transparent elections as a foundation for **institutional strength** and ensuring a **robust political party system.** • Resilience against internal challenges (e.g., attempts to falsify elections) and external interference.	Moldova's 2024 presidential election saw Maia Sandu win with 55%, despite Russian interference; the process was deemed efficient and transparent, showing electoral resilience (Kirby 2024).
Liberal	• Central to all three dimensions of democratic resilience: **institutional strength, civic engagement and societal values.** • Preventive and reactive against internal backsliding trends (e.g. instances of circumventing judicial independence and impartiality) and external threats, such as foreign information, manipulation and interference (FIMI).	Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution brought judicial reform and anti-corruption efforts under its CEPA agreement with the EU (Kaplan 2022).
Participatory	• Contributes to **civic engagement** and **societal values** dimensions of resilience. • Promotes civil society and wider democratic engagement as a 'watchdog' against backsliding and external interferences.	Moldova's participatory budgeting fosters grassroots trust; Ukraine's ALDA-supported community centers for war-affected groups enhanced civic resilience (ALDA 2024).
Egalitarian	• Contributes to building **social cohesion**, thereby reducing the risk of internal or external actors exploiting societal vulnerabilities.	Georgia's EU-funded initiatives—like "Job Equality" and "EU4Gender Equality"—promote gender and disability rights, expanding inclusion (Mussnig 2023).
Feminist	• Central to both the civic engagement and societal values components of democratic resilience through strengthened female participation.	Belarusian civic resistance—especially female-led solidarity and neighbourhood support during the 2020 protests—showcased the power of women's collective actions (Mussnig 2023).
Peacebuilding	• Anchors democratic resilience through peaceful conflict resolution and international cooperation, providing the background for **institutional development, civic engagement and upholding societal values.**	Armenia's "Crossroads of Peace" project and EU backing promote territorial integrity and dialogue, aiding democratic stability amid regional tensions (Balayan 2025).

With this in mind, although there is conceptual synergy, it can be noted that the EU, as well as other donors could build on its existing democracy funding design by deepening the "institutional strength" dimension through **stronger engagement with the electoral model**. This is particularly relevant as the proliferation of AI facilitates FIMI, disinformation campaigns, and micro-targeting of voters, thereby increasing the vulnerability of electoral processes and the integrity of democratic competition in the EN countries. Moreover, **stronger and more inclusive engagement with civil society** in the EN countries is crucial, especially in light of the shutdown of USAID, which has left a significant gap in support for participatory initiatives and grassroots democratic engagement. This relates particularly to the practical dimension of resilience, namely countering democratic backsliding and external interference. More broadly, moving from democracy funding to fostering democratic resilience requires the EU to establish **sustainable collaborative links** with democratic actors in partner countries and to design interventions jointly, tailoring them to both current and anticipated threats to democracy.

2.2 EU's geopolitical awakening

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted then EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell to announce the EU's "geopolitical awakening". As conceptualised by Borrell, this turn – or "a belated birth of geopolitical Europe" encompasses several action dimensions, namely:

Table 2: EU's Geopolitical Awakening (quotes on the left side are direct ones from Borrell (2022))

Direction of action	Explanation
"Think and act in terms of power"	Being able to defend positions and enact goals, including through "hard power" tools, such as sanctions or – if needed – even military means.
"Take the initiative and be ready to experiment"	Proactivity and active pursuit of own agenda, especially amid proliferating threats.
"Build diverse coalitions and take decisions faster"	Be more pragmatic (i.e. goal- and result- oriented), when establishing alliances and facilitate the intra-EU decision-making.
"Shape the narrative"	*"Investing in a common strategic culture, which needs a European debate, a space to discuss about what we can and cannot do in EU foreign policy and why".*

Framed as a 'paradigm shift' in the EU's foreign policy, inevitably also exerting a significant impact on EU member states, the EU's geopolitical awakening unsurprisingly attracted significant scholarly attention. Many contributions have explored the extent to which EU policies, adopted in response to the full-scale invasion (e.g., sanctions against Russia, the granting of candidate country status to Moldova and Ukraine in June 2022, and to Georgia in 2023) enable the Union to qualify as a geopolitical power, including both vocal pro-opinions (Maurer et al 2023; Maurer et al 2024); and the more critical ones. Others tackled further conceptual questions, particularly **asking whether and to what extent the EU can be both a geopolitical and a normative power** (Szumowski 2024; Michalski and Parker 2024). This question is particularly relevant in the context of the EU's reinvigorated enlargement policy, which scholarship often frames as a part of the EU's engagement in a broader competition over Europe's political, security, and economic order (Raik et al 2024). While recognizing that in certain cases, such as the idea of fast-track EU accession that overlooks candidate countries' compliance with EU norms, geopolitical and normative logics can come into conflict, we argue in this section that the **EU's quest for stronger geopolitical influence in the region does not, and should not, require abandoning its normative principles – neither by the Union, nor by its member states**. Below, we present several logically connected arguments, supporting this claim.

Foremost, it should be mentioned that the geopolitics-normativity debate is not entirely new. The EU's post-Lisbon external action and the 2016 EUGS openly acknowledge power politics, strategic autonomy, and security competition (EEAS 2016) This evolution has prompted a scholarly and policy debate about whether the Union must scale back, or even abandon, its normative agenda to "get serious" about geopolitics (Zielonka 2006; Tocci 2007). Yet the classic proposition that the EU is a *normative power* (Manners 2002)

need not be understood as antithetical to geopolitical effectiveness. As Barnett and Duvall's (2005) typology of power suggests, ideational, structural, and productive forms of power operate in tandem with material and coercive instruments. In this sense, **norms are not simply moral preferences but strategic resources that influence preference formation, institutional design, and cost–benefit calculations across the EN region.**

The juxtaposition thus misdiagnoses the causal relationship. It is not that the EU can be "geopolitical" only if it relaxes its rule-of-law, anti-corruption, and human-rights conditionality. Instead, the aforementioned **elements of democratic resilience** (robust electoral processes, separation of powers and the rule of law, anti-corruption institutions, active civil society, inclusive party and representation systems, and societally embedded commitments to minority and women's rights, social cohesion, and the commitment to peace) can be seen as fostering long-term leverage in the EN region (Börzel and Risse 2012; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011). These norms build democratic resilience against such threats, external interference, disinformation, elite capture, and corrosive capital, through which rival geopolitical actors project influence.

In his seminal work on normative power Europe, Manners (2002) originally argued that the EU's distinctiveness lies in its ability to diffuse norms. Critics have since questioned both the EU's consistency and its effectiveness as a normative power (Hyde-Price 2006). Yet, the shift toward "strategic autonomy" and talks of a "geopolitical Commission" do not invalidate the insight that norms are performative sources of power. Instead, domestic and international legitimacy is essential to sustaining long-term influence, especially where material coercion is limited (Keohane 1984). Neither does the "geopolitical awakening" — in any of its four propositions referred to in Table 2- necessarily conflict with this view, except insofar as some critics may be wary of EU alliances with non-democratic, not like-minded partners.

In this vein, we argue that the **EUGS' turn to resilience** – widely taken up by its member states - (Juncos 2017) provides the conceptual bridge between the geopolitical and normative facets of the EU's power: democratic institutions, rule of law, and empowered civil societies are what make partner states resistant to coercion, corruption, and hybrid threats (Polyakova and Meserole 2019). Seen through the lens of Barnett and Duvall's (2005) typology, EU geopolitical actorness can be conceptualised through four lenses: compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive powers.

- **Compulsory power** includes accession processes, macro-financial assistance, and security support, translates norms into tangible leverage.
- **Institutional power** entails embedding partners into EU-centred regimes and monitoring architectures (e.g., rule-of-law scorecards, anti-corruption benchmarks) and structures their action spaces.
- By defining what "normal" governance looks like, the EU's **structural power** shapes the identities and role conceptions of political elites.
- Finally, **productive power** constructs narratives about Europe's peaceful order, minority protection, and democratic standards, which together define what counts as legitimate political practice. Rather than functioning as substitutes, these forms of power complement the EU's growing hard-power toolbox.

The EU uses norms to amplify its geopolitical actorness through three mechanisms: **legitimation and coalition building**, **institutional lock-in and strategic dependence**, and **societal resilience against hybrid threats**. By cooperating with the EU and relevant external actors, member states contribute to reinforcing these mechanisms and extending the EU's normative and geopolitical reach.

The **legitimation and coalition-building** mechanism allows the EU's and member states' adherence to democratic benchmarks to provide credibility to its offers and demands. When the European Commission conditions financial assistance or security support on anti-corruption reforms or judicial independence, it signals—both to domestic constituencies and external observers—that its engagement seeks collective goods, not merely patronage or spheres of influence (Börzel and Schimmelfennig 2017). This reduces audience costs for reformist elites, who can justify politically costly reforms as prerequisites for deeper integration and security guarantees. It also broadens the EU's coalition by enabling transnational networks

of NGOs, investigative journalists, and watchdog entities to become domestic allies reinforcing EU leverage (Sasse 2008).

Through **institutional lock-in and strategic dependence**, the EU and its member states embed partner countries in rule-of-law, competition, procurement, and gender-equality frameworks. This process generates high switching costs for elites contemplating alternative alignments with non-democratic partners. Robust electoral processes, separation of powers, and active civil society oversight create institutional veto points against authoritarian backsliding or oligarchic capture - precisely the channels through which rival powers traditionally project influence (Kelemen 2020). In short, the deeper the normative *acquis* diffuses, the more costly it becomes to unwind EU alignment in favour of authoritarian patrons.

The **societal resilience against hybrid threats** mechanism treats anti-corruption measures, minority protection (including women's rights), and social cohesion as security assets. Corruption is a direct instrument of geopolitical penetration; dismantling it reduces the effectiveness of external coercive economic statecraft (Vachudova 2014). Tools to protect minorities and inclusive political representation mitigate societal cleavages often exploited by disinformation campaigns and proxy actors. Active civil society organisations act as early-warning systems for hybrid operations and help sustain public support for costly pro-EU policy choices (Kelemen 2020).

There is sufficient anecdotal evidence to support the claim that the EU **can and does use its adherence to democratic norms to bolster its geopolitical actorness**. This trend is clearly reflected in the inceptives and behavior of aid recipients. In Ukraine, anti-corruption institutions (NABU, SAPO, HACC) and judicial reforms have become pivotal to sustaining Western financial and military support. These are not merely "normative" add-ons. They are security measures that ensure that unprecedented inflows of aid and defense procurement are not captured by oligarchic or hostile networks. In Moldova, the Sandu administration's emphasis on judicial reform and anti-corruption has directly bolstered country's capacity to withstand energy coercion and disinformation campaigns, while creating domestic legitimacy for accelerated EU integration steps. In Georgia, the EU's struggle to maintain leverage amid democratic backsliding by governing elites underscores the costs of decoupling geopolitical support from normative conditionality. Broad public support for Europe remains strong, but elite resistance to rule-of-law reforms dilutes EU influence. **These anecdotes suggest that where the EU binds geopolitical and normative instruments tightly together, enjoying support from member states and other relevant donors, it increases both the durability and depth of alignment. Where it relaxes normative strings, leverage erodes.**

This finding is particularly relevant for the EU's enlargement policy, especially in light of its recent experience with limited instruments to safeguard fundamental values in Poland and Hungary during the rule-of-law crises of the past decade (Kochenov, et al. 2016). **It also calls for a broader reflection on how "geopolitical" enlargement should be understood - not primarily as a matter of rapid integration, but as a process grounded in credibility, sustained engagement, and the long-term cultivation of democratic resilience and collaboration.** From this perspective, the design of accession processes, particularly regarding the EN region and Western Balkans, should combine conditionality with effective enforcement mechanisms and sustained capacity-building to prevent democratic backsliding after accession. This would involve not only advancing reforms in areas such as the rule of law, anti-corruption, and media freedom, but also embedding safeguards to ensure these gains endure once the leverage of accession negotiations diminishes. Central to this approach is fostering democratic resilience by enabling both institutions and societies to withstand, adapt to, and recover from pressures, while deepening democratic collaboration between EU institutions and actors in partner countries through co-developed strategies, shared best practices, and coordinated responses to present and anticipated threats. This is particularly relevant in light of the engagement opportunities arising from the gap left by the withdrawal of USAID, which has historically been a major supporter of participatory models and grassroots democratic initiatives in the EN region. Seen in this way, enlargement becomes not merely a geopolitical tool for expanding the EU's reach, but a credible, long-term investment in building durable and collaborative democratic systems in new member states.

The EU's geopolitical turn need not come at the expense of its normative identity. Properly understood, the Union's democratic resilience toolkit functions as a power multiplier, delivering legitimacy, locking in alignment, and strengthening societies against coercive influence. In the EN region, where hybrid warfare,

corruption, and disinformation remain principal modalities of external power projection, the rule of law, anti-corruption measures, inclusive institutions, and the protection of minority and women's rights are not idealistic embellishments, but strategic instruments. Recognising them as such reinforces the case for enlargement and external engagement grounded in credibility, sustained cooperation, and the long-term cultivation of democratic resilience and collaboration. Ultimately, the EU's ability to combine geopolitical reach with normative depth, also in its collaboration with other donors, will determine not only the durability of its influence, but also the stability and democratic vitality of the EN region.

3. Key findings and challenges of EU democracy support research

3.1 Variation in concepts of democracy and challenges to research on democracy support

Research on democracy support, particularly foreign aid aimed at promoting democratic governance, has grown significantly in both academic and policy contexts over the last two decades (Carothers 2009; Finkel et al 2007). In the context of the EN region, democracy support has been a stated strategic objective of EU enlargement and neighbourhood policies, operationalised through instruments such as the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), and bilateral assistance programs. Yet, the variation in concepts of democracy remains a persistent and often under-theorised challenge to this field. Democracy is what Gallie (1956) famously called an "essentially contested concept" (Gallie 1956), a term whose very meaning is subject to normative disagreement, contextual variation, and political struggle. The multiplicity of democratic models discussed in this paper (electoral, liberal, participatory, egalitarian, feminist, and peacebuilding) reflects this conceptual contestation.

This working paper argues that this **conceptual plurality** presents a fundamental challenge to the empirical study of democracy support. Nowhere is this more visible than in efforts to analyse EU foreign aid flows to democratic actors and institutions in the Eastern Neighbourhood. While scholars and policymakers often seek to measure the "amount" of democracy support, such measures are invariably shaped by prior assumptions about what democracy is and which of its components aid programs seek to strengthen.

The literature has long recognised the multiplicity of democratic forms and their theoretical underpinnings (Saward 1994; Beetham 1999). While all democratic models share a commitment to rule by the people, they differ in the mechanisms, priorities, and outcomes emphasised. Electoral model focuses on competitive elections and voting rights. Liberal model adds constitutional constraints, rule of law, and protection of human rights. Participatory model emphasises citizen involvement in decision-making beyond elections. Egalitarian model centers on equality of outcomes and socio-economic inclusion. Feminist model incorporates gender justice, recognition of care work, and dismantling patriarchy. Peacebuilding model seeks to institutionalise inclusion and conflict resolution in postwar societies.

In the context of democracy support, these models are not mutually exclusive. However, they are analytically distinct. Their coexistence reflects not only theoretical diversity but also practical variation in donor priorities, recipient needs, and contextual feasibility (Schmitter et al 1991; Youngs 2001). This variation presents an ontological challenge to research. Before any measurement or causal inference can take place, one must define what kind of democracy is being supported, by whom, and how. The same aid project might be coded as supporting electoral, liberal, or participatory democracy, depending on the theoretical lens applied.

The European Commission, the main distributor of EU democracy aid, publishes extensive datasets on development cooperation through tools like the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), the OECD Creditor Reporting System (CRS), and the EU's Financial Transparency System. However, these datasets do not classify democracy support by model or concept, but rather by broad thematic areas such as governance, civil society, justice reform, gender equality, or peacebuilding. Therefore, a major analytical difficulty arises because many of these categories overlap across different democratic models. For example, funding under "civil society support" may involve organisations that monitor elections (electoral model), advocate for minority rights (egalitarian/feminist models), or promote participatory budgeting (participatory model).

"Rule of law" projects may aim at liberal-constitutional guarantees, but also contribute to peacebuilding efforts in post-conflict regions. "Gender equality" programs are often siloed from mainstream democracy support, despite feminist scholars arguing that they represent a distinct democratic model (Celis and Lovenduski 2018). These categorical ambiguities make it difficult for researchers to allocate aid flows to specific democratic models. The challenge is especially acute in quantitative studies that rely on purpose codes or keywords to assign democracy aid to outcomes. Coding decisions become inherently normative and risk introducing hidden biases.

In quantitative research, the ambiguity of aid categories creates validity and comparability issues. For example, a study attempting to correlate aid flows with democratic consolidation across countries in the EN region must decide whether all democracy-related funding is equal. Moreover, attempts to model the effectiveness of democracy support (e.g., through regression or panel data methods) require the consistent treatment of variables. However, without a clear mapping of aid to specific democratic dimensions, results are hard to interpret, and generalizations become tenuous (Bush 2015; Finkel et al 2007).

In qualitative research, the multiplicity of democracy concepts presents challenges of conceptual stretching (Sartori 1970). Interview-based or ethnographic studies must navigate different understandings of democracy among donors, local actors, and beneficiaries. For instance, EU officials may emphasise liberal institutional design, while local NGOs advocate for feminist or participatory reforms. These divergent frameworks complicate the identification of causal mechanisms and the interpretation of actors' motives. Furthermore, donors' own ambiguity or strategic vagueness about democracy models often leaves researchers with inconsistent or conflicting documentary evidence. The same EU strategic document may invoke "rule of law," "empowerment," "resilience," and "good governance" without clarifying their interrelation or underlying normative assumptions (Börzel and Schimmelfennig 2017).

The enduring and profound nature of conceptual variation in democracy constitutes a foundational challenge to the study of support of democracy. Nowhere is this more visible than in research on EU foreign aid to the EN region, where overlapping categories and normative ambiguity hinder systematic analysis. This variation reflects the contested, political, and evolving nature of democracy. Rather than seeking premature standardisation, researchers should embrace this complexity through greater theoretical transparency, methodological clarity, and mapping of democratic models. By doing so, studies of democracy support can improve their analytical coherence and contribute to a more reflexive and grounded understanding of how democracy is promoted, interpreted, and transformed across diverse political landscapes.

3.2 Differing time horizons of donor-supported projects and initiatives: what we learn from the data

The study of democracy support is a complex and interdisciplinary field. Yet, despite advancements in theory and method, temporal misalignment between donors' logics and research requirements continues to undermine the field's analytical coherence and policy relevance. Democracy is, by nature, a long-term process, often unfolding over decades and subject to non-linear trajectories, including reversals and hybrid developments (Carothers 2002). By contrast, donor-supported democracy aid projects are frequently designed with short time horizons, driven by political cycles, budgetary constraints, and institutional logic of accountability (Henson et al 2012). This mismatch between the temporal scale of democratic change and the operational lifespan of donor interventions complicates efforts to evaluate effectiveness, sustainability, and causality of the latter.

The dataset on International and EU funding in the EN region (2005-2022) reveals an important data gap (Vlasenko and Freyburg 2024). The OECD database does not systematically specify the duration of individual aid projects (Ibid). Many entries include commitment or disbursement dates, but there are no standardised field for project start and end dates, nor for implementation timelines. As a result, it is nearly impossible to distinguish between short-term technical assistance from multi-year institutional reform efforts, sustained strategic engagement from isolated one-off interventions, and projects with cumulative outcomes from those with fleeting impacts. This temporal opacity severely limits the ability of researchers to track the evolution of donor strategies, measure sustained engagement, or evaluate the causal effects of democracy support over time.

The absence of time-specific data complicates attribution. Without knowing how long a given project lasted, it becomes extremely difficult to assess whether observed democratic outcomes (e.g., improvements in judicial independence, electoral integrity, civil society vitality) can be plausibly linked to specific donor interventions. In addition, the absence of project duration data contributes to data fragmentation and misclassification. The REDEMOS team observed multiple instances in which single projects appear in the dataset as several entries without clarity as to whether these are separate projects or continued funding tranches of the same initiative. This can inflate project counts, distort comparative analyses, and complicate the construction of valid dependent variables. Even more problematically, the variation in project scale is not adequately captured in existing reporting fields. Without temporal and scale data, efforts to classify and compare democracy aid across countries or sectors become analytically fragile.

The lack of consistent timing data precludes longitudinal research. It is very difficult to study how democracy aid unfolds and interacts with domestic political trajectories over time. This limits the ability to identify delayed effects or lasting transformations (European Democracy Hub 2024). In fragile or transitional contexts, the impact of donor engagement may only materialise after several election cycles or constitutional reforms. Without access to reliable project timelines, researchers are left unable to discern between short-lived donor engagement and long-term strategic investment. This temporal blindness undermines the field's ability to inform policy decisions on when, how, and for how long to engage in democracy promotion.

The temporal dimension of democracy support, especially the often-missing data on project duration and implementation timing, represents a profound methodological challenge to the field. As the recent experience with OECD data illustrates, the absence of clear, standardised time information obstructs attribution, skews comparisons, and prevents rigorous longitudinal analysis. Democracy, as both a norm and a system, develops gradually. Research and evaluation must match this time-conscious logic by demanding better data, adopting appropriate research designs, and resisting the temptation to draw conclusions from snapshots of donor activity. Without this temporal recalibration, our understanding of democracy support will remain partial, fragmented, and ultimately less useful to the policymakers and societies it aims to serve.

3.3 Domestic political landscapes and ontological and methodological challenges for democracy support research

The EU's, its member states', as well as other bilateral and multilateral donors' engagement in promoting democracy in its Eastern Neighbourhood has become both more ambitious and more fraught in recent years. As democratic backsliding, revolution, and war increasingly characterise the region, researchers face a persistent problem of evaluating democracy support in contexts where everything is in constant change. We argue that shifts in domestic political landscapes give rise to ontological and methodological challenges for democracy support research. These challenges are compounded by geopolitical shocks, predominantly the ongoing war and international sanctions, which not only disrupt democracy promotion efforts but alter the very frameworks through which their outcomes are analysed. As the EU and its member states attempt to scale and recalibrate its democracy support mechanisms, particularly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the ability of researchers to keep pace with these changes becomes increasingly strained.

Democracy is not a monolithic or universally stable concept. As it was mentioned above, it is widely accepted as an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1956), interpreted through multiple models including electoral, liberal, participatory, egalitarian, feminist, and peacebuilding variants (Freyburg et al 2024). In relatively stable environments, researchers can operationalise democracy through consistent indicators: free elections, independent media, civil liberties, judicial independence, etc. However, in the Eastern Neighbourhood, domestic political shifts destabilise these meanings. For example, in Ukraine, democratic consolidation in the post-Euromaidan period emphasised anti-corruption and rule of law. However, after 2022, democracy became entwined with wartime resilience, media regulation, and emergency governance. In Armenia, the 2018 Velvet Revolution initially bolstered participatory and liberal democracy models, but the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war shifted the political narrative toward nationalism and security. In Georgia, alternating governments have redefined democracy in partisan terms, leading to democratic stagnation and contested interpretations of judicial reform.

Such variation introduces ontological instability. What "counts" as democratic progress or regression is not consistent across time or space. Furthermore, these shifts create difficulties in attributing impact. If a democratic breakthrough occurs (for example, free local elections), is it the result of sustained EU support, domestic mobilisation, or shifting elite interests? When democratic regression happens, is it due to donor failure, geopolitical coercion, or internal authoritarian drift? In highly fluid contexts, the causal logic of democracy support breaks down, demanding more nuanced and historically informed analytical frameworks (Grimm and Leininger 2012).

In addition to ontological fluidity, political volatility presents significant methodological challenges. Changes in political regimes often lead to interruptions in data availability and reliability. In autocratising states, civil society actors may be repressed, governmental transparency reduced, and donor activity restricted or ceased. For instance, after the 2020-21 protests in Belarus, international donors and researchers lost access to crucial implementation data as the Lukashenko regime cracked down on NGOs and EU-funded institutions. Even in semi-democratic contexts like Georgia or Moldova, changes in leadership can lead to reorganisation of ministries, replacement of project staff, and redefinition of democracy promotion priorities. All of these processes result in fragmented project documentation and poor institutional memory.

Beyond domestic politics, geopolitical shifts can rapidly and fundamentally transform the conditions for both democracy support and its study. The most dramatic example is Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Before the war, the EU's and its member states' democracy funding in the EN region focused on electoral integrity, media freedom, and anti-corruption. Amid the war, resilience, security assistance, and state-building have become the primary foci. Researchers must now navigate an entirely different landscape, in which emergency governance coexists with democratic aspirations, and in which military aid and democracy promotion become entangled. Similarly, shifting alliances, such as those in Russia-Armenia relations in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its end or Azerbaijan's use of democratic rhetoric to mask authoritarian consolidation, alter the interpretive frameworks through which EU engagement is understood. This requires researchers to continually reassess their assumptions, methods, and theories of change.

Shifts in domestic political landscapes and geopolitical environments present fundamental ontological and methodological challenges to the study of EU democracy support in the EN region. These shifts destabilise core concepts, disrupt data access, and undermine comparability across time and space. Yet, these challenges are not insurmountable. By adopting more flexible, adaptive, and context-aware research strategies, scholars can better navigate volatility and produce more meaningful, policy-relevant insights. In a constantly changing EN region, democracy research must itself become more resilient, just like the democratic systems it seeks to study and support.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to critically engage with the findings of WP3 by analysing the substance, key patterns, and long-term trends in EU democracy funding in the EN region between 2005 and 2022, in comparison with funding by EU member states and other donors and by assessing their implications for both the practice of democracy support and respective scholarship. The relevance of this analysis is shaped by three interrelated factors. First, the region continues to face profound challenges—including Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, the proliferation of hybrid threats, and the increasing divergence in political and economic trajectories among partner countries. Second, the EU and its member states have accumulated nearly two decades of experience in democracy promotion in the region, creating an urgent need to consolidate and systematize this knowledge. Third, new conceptual frameworks, such as democratic resilience and the EU's geopolitical awakening, have emerged for interpreting developments both within the region and within the EU itself, making it essential to reassess earlier assumptions and analytical approaches.

In terms of *democracy support practice*, one of the central contributions of this paper is the emphasis on **democratic resilience** as a potential new guiding principle for the EU and member states' democracy support – and, subsequently, funding for democracy in the EN region. Democratic resilience also emerges as a desirable outcome of the EU's own democracy-promotion efforts, as well as those undertaken in cooperation with other external donors. We show that the funding provided by the EU, its member states, and other relevant donors—such as the United States and a range of international organisations (e.g., the International

Development Association and various UN bodies)—between 2005 and 2022, understood through the six conceptual models introduced by Freyburg et al. (2024), has already made **substantial contributions to strengthening democratic resilience in the EN region** as conceived in current scholarship. However, the limited engagement of the EU and other donors with the electoral model, combined with the growing need for more participatory approaches, particularly in light of USAID's withdrawal—has created a set of new priorities for democracy support in the EN region. Moreover, an emphasis on democratic resilience must go hand in hand with **stronger attention to the actor–threat nexus**, ensuring that the EU fosters **democratic collaboration**, capable of targeting specific external and internal pressures through stronger capacity and synergies between relevant actors.

The paper also stresses that the EU's pursuit of geopolitical influence in the EN region – inevitably also affecting its member states and their policy priorities — need not undermine its core normative values. Thereby **resilience**, broadly conceived, as well as **democratic resilience can be seen as a bridge between the EU's geopolitical and normative aspirations.** Through both the conceptual discussion and empirical examples, it is shown that particularly the focus on democratic resilience, including **threats-oriented targeted democratic collaboration** is important for keeping the EU's geopolitical role in the region upfront. This **normative continuity** distinguishes the EU and its member states from other global powers with more transactional or authoritarian approaches. EU democracy funding — ideally aligned with that, provided by member states and relevant bilateral and multilateral donors, should be thus crafted as a careful blend of realpolitik and idealism, a balance that is essential for preserving the EU's and other donors' credibility and effectiveness in a region where democratic backsliding and authoritarian influence remain persistent threats.

Finally, from the perspective of *democracy promotion research*, the paper highlights how the complex and contested nature of democracy itself presents significant challenges to the study and evaluation of democracy support efforts. The **diversity of democracy models** and the **varied timeframes and scales of projects** make it difficult to compare outcomes or attribute causality with precision. In addition, **rapid shifts in domestic politics and geopolitics** continuously reshape the environment in which democracy promotion operates, demanding adaptive and context-sensitive research methodologies. Addressing these ontological and methodological challenges is critical not only for producing more reliable data but also for informing policy decisions that reflect the nuanced realities on the ground. The analysis reaffirms the central role of the EU and its member states as key democracy promoters in the EN region, while acknowledging the complex environment in which they operate.

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