



REDEMOS

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

REDEMOS Report D6.3

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.18267307](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18267307)

Third-Country Competition and EU Democracy Support in the Eastern Neighbourhood

Kristi Raik, ICDS

Igor Gretskiy, ICDS

Tetiana Fedosiuk, ICDS

Ekaterine Metreveli, GFSIS

Kakha Gogolashvili, GFSIS

Arusyak Aleksanyan, Yerevan State University

Alexander Maltsev, Yerevan State University

December 2025



Funded by
the European Union

The REDEMOS project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101061738. The Associated Partner University of Surrey has received funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under the UK government's Horizon Europe funding guarantee under grant number 10040721. The Associated Partner University of St. Gallen has received funding from the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, UKRI and SERI. Neither the European Union nor UKRI or SERI can be held responsible for them.

Executive Summary

This report analyses and compares the strategies of four major geopolitical actors—Russia, China, the United States (US), and the European Union (EU)—in the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood (EN). It focuses on how their competing or overlapping approaches influence political transition and democratic development across Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The EN region represents a geopolitical crossroads, where external ambitions collide with fragile state institutions and contested democratic trajectories.

The report argues that while the EU and the US have supported democratic governance through conditionality, institutional reforms, and civil society assistance, their influence has been uneven and often limited by internal political divisions and geopolitical caution. Russia, by contrast, actively undermines democratic development as it seeks to keep the countries under its control by violating their security and sovereignty, exploiting various tools of influence, such as energy blackmail and disinformation, and using or threatening to use military force. China, though less overtly political, promotes a ‘development-first’ model that often undermines democratic conditionality, pursuing bilateral economic relations and technological influence.’

By summarising and synthesising the findings of REDEMOS WP6 and complementing them with a review of relevant documents and previous research, the report concludes that external influences in the EN region have produced fragmented and contested outcomes for democracy. The EU must adapt to the increasingly competitive geopolitical environment by complementing its democracy promotion strategies with stronger support to the security and sovereignty of EN countries and cooperation to enhance their resilience against authoritarian interference.



Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | 2 |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS..... | 3 |
| LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS | 4 |
| 2 INTRODUCTION | 5 |
| 3 STRATEGIC POSTURE OF THE FOUR MAJOR ACTORS..... | 7 |
| 3.1 RUSSIA | 7 |
| 3.2 CHINA | 9 |
| 3.3 THE UNITED STATES..... | 11 |
| 3.4 THE EUROPEAN UNION..... | 13 |
| 4 MAPPING THE GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE | 15 |
| 4.1 POLITICAL AND SECURITY CONNECTIONS | 15 |
| 4.2 ECONOMIC LINKS | 19 |
| 4.3 SOCIETAL CONNECTIONS..... | 21 |
| 5 THE FOUR MAJOR ACTORS: A COMPARISON..... | 24 |
| 5.1 CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES IN STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND TOOLS..... | 24 |
| 5.2 INFLUENCE OF DEMOCRATISATION | 25 |
| 6 ADAPTING EU DEMOCRACY SUPPORT TO GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION..... | 26 |
| 6.1 HOW GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION HAS SHAPED EU POLICY TOWARDS THE EN..... | 26 |
| 6.2 STRATEGIC CHALLENGES AND POLICY DILEMMAS | 28 |
| 7 CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: HOW TO IMPROVE AND ADJUST EU DEMOCRACY SUPPORT TO THE GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT? | 30 |
| POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS..... | 32 |
| REFERENCES..... | 34 |

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

| | |
|----------|--|
| 4G/5G | Fourth-/Fifth-generation of cellular network technology |
| AA | Association Agreement |
| BRI | Belt and Road Initiative (China) |
| CCAWECC | China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor |
| CEE | Central and Eastern Europe |
| CEPA | Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement |
| CFSP | Common Foreign and Security Policy (EU) |
| CIS | Commonwealth of Independent States |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus disease 2019 |
| CSDP | Common Security and Defence Policy |
| CSF | Civil Society Facility |
| CSTO | Collective Security Treaty Organization |
| DCFTA | Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area |
| EAEU | Eurasian Economic Union |
| EaP | Eastern Partnership |
| EEAS | European External Action Service |
| EED | European Endowment for Democracy |
| EPF | European Peace Facility |
| EN | Eastern Neighbourhood |
| ENP | European Neighbourhood Policy |
| ENTSO-E | European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity |
| EPC | European Political Community |
| EU | European Union |
| EUAM | European Union Advisory Mission for Civilian Sector Reform (Ukraine) |
| EUBAM | European Union Border Assistance Mission (Moldova, Ukraine) |
| EUGS | European Union’s Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy |
| EUMA | European Union Mission in Armenia |
| EUMM | European Union Monitoring Mission (Georgia) |
| FDI | foreign direct investment |
| GSI | Global Security Initiative (China) |
| IRI | International Republican Institute (US) |
| MFA | Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia) |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| NDI | National Democratic Institute (US) |
| NED | National Endowment for Democracy (US) |
| NGO | non-governmental organisation |
| ODIHR | Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE) |
| OSCE | Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe |
| PCA | Partnership and Cooperation Agreement |
| SCO | Shanghai Cooperation Organisation |
| TAIEX | Technical Assistance and Information Exchange |
| TEN-T | Trans-European Transport Network |
| US | United States |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |

1 Introduction

Each of the six EN countries—**Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine**—has navigated complex paths of post-Soviet transformation while facing internal governance challenges, competing external influences and (with the exception of Belarus) unresolved territorial conflicts. The region’s historical legacies and, in many cases, fragile state institutions and polarised societies make political development in the EN highly susceptible to external pressure.

The EN states vary significantly in their political trajectories. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have pursued democratic reforms with varying intensity and success, while Armenia has oscillated up to recent times between reform and regression. Azerbaijan has entrenched authoritarianism behind the façade of elections, and Belarus, after a brief liberalisation in the 1990s, has reverted to an openly autocratic regime under Alexander Lukashenko’s rule. These trajectories are not determined solely by domestic choices. Instead, they are deeply influenced by the geopolitical context in which these states are embedded, and by the involvement of powerful external actors.

The EN is not only a geographic space but also a normative battleground, where competing external powers either actively promote or instrumentally favour divergent governance models—liberal-democratic, authoritarian, and hybrid. The region has been a particular focus for the **European Union’s** normative agenda through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP). At the same time, the EU has experienced intense geopolitical pushback from **Russia**, whose strategic interest in maintaining influence in its ‘near abroad’ is rooted in both ‘security interests’ (as defined by the Kremlin) and the logic of regime survival. More recently, **China** has entered the EN as an economic actor with increasing political and technological weight, while the **United States** maintained (until the second Trump administration took office in 2025) a strong democracy assistance portfolio with selective strategic engagement. The report focuses on the role of these four largest actors, while acknowledging that there are other regional powers with a significant influence in the EN countries, notably Türkiye.

Different external actors bring competing agendas: some emphasise democratic values and institutional reform, while others pursue geopolitical control, elite cooperation, or economic interests. Their influence is not only visible in high-level diplomacy and military posture, but also in the diffusion of models of governance, patterns of conditionality, and resource flows often targeting media, civil society, and state institutions. While the EU and the US generally promote democratic reforms, their effectiveness varies by country and over time. By contrast, Russia actively undermines democratic development, while China utilises a development-first, state-centric approach that often bypasses democratic conditionality.

The EN’s strategic significance is multifaceted:

- **First**, the region can be seen as a geopolitical ‘grey zone’ where major powers assert their influence in pursuit of their strategic goals.
- **Second**, the region is fraught with unresolved conflicts—such as those in Crimea, Donbas, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia—that endanger regional security and are exploited by Russia in particular as a pretext for involvement and as a lever of control.
- **Third**, it hosts important energy transit routes linking Europe with the Caspian region and Central Asia.

- **Fourth**, and perhaps most critical for this study, it functions as a ‘normative laboratory’, where the competition between liberal democratic values and authoritarian alternatives is playing out.

Through the EaP, Association Agreements (AAs), and other forms of bilateral engagement, the **European Union** promotes a model of integration and democratisation via conditionality and institutional support. However, the EU’s leverage is often limited by its internal divisions, geopolitical caution, and uncertainty about EU enlargement prospects. The **United States**—through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and other instruments—has a long tradition of supporting civil society, media freedom, electoral processes, and institution building, but its strategic consistency varies across administrations. **Russia**, by contrast, emphasises sovereignty, elite loyalty and repression of dissent. Its toolkit includes military intervention and support for separatism, as well as energy and economic coercion. **China** adopts a non-confrontational but increasingly influential presence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), digital infrastructure, and claimed diplomatic neutrality, subtly reinforcing authoritarian governance practices without direct imposition.

This report seeks to address the following research question: How do the strategies and instruments employed by the European Union, the United States, Russia, and China shape the political transition and democratic development of the Eastern Neighbourhood countries? By focusing on these four major geopolitical actors, the study aims to map the diversity of external engagement in the region and assess its impact on democracy promotion or erosion. The analysis focuses on the period between 2004, when the EU started to become more active in the region, and 2024, when geopolitical tensions and normative battles were at their highest. It also makes references to the earlier years of post-Soviet transition to provide deeper context, and notes the remarkable but so far indetermined change in US policy in 2025, under the second presidency of Donald Trump.

Conceptually, we distance ourselves from the notion of ‘autocracy promotion’, which has been contested in academic debates. Our research provides sufficient evidence that Russia and China, in their different ways, empower autocratic leaders and delegitimise democratic governments in the EN region. Whether this shows that Russia and China are actually motivated by the goal to ‘promote autocracy’—and thus whether the concept of ‘autocracy promotion’ is the most adequate one to analyse their policies—remains disputed (Kneuer et al. 2025, 9). It is misleading to draw a parallel between the EU’s and the US’s approaches to democracy promotion and the Russian and Chinese impact on governance systems in foreign countries. Western actors (including, until recently, the US) have defined it as an important strategic goal to support democracy worldwide (including in the EN region), seeing it as a moral imperative rooted in their values and a way to have a long-lasting positive impact on peace, security, governance, and the well-being of citizens. The consistency and effectiveness of this approach have been uneven, and its underlying presumptions contested, but promoting democracy has been a strategic goal, nonetheless. Russia and China, by contrast, do not define ‘autocracy promotion’ as their strategic interest—rather, their policies in the EN region are motivated by establishing control over a sphere of influence in the case of Russia and more economy-oriented interests in the case of China. Both countries are also motivated by a vision of a ‘multi-polar world order’, where their major power status is secured and they can push back US and Western influence, including in the normative sphere. The promotion of strategic interests by Russia and China often has a negative impact on democracy in the target countries—yet not due to ‘autocracy promotion’ being a goal in itself.

Our analysis draws on a wide array of sources, including Redemos policy papers, relevant official documents, academic studies, and expert assessments. It considers both formal tools (e.g., treaties, aid, and conditionality) and informal mechanisms (e.g., media narratives, elite networks, and technological platforms).

The report starts with a comprehensive, analytical overview of the strategies of the four major actors—Russia, China, the US, and the EU—as well as the approaches, instruments, and mechanisms they employ and the impact those have on the democratic development in the EN countries. The next section maps the geopolitical landscape of political, security, economic, and societal connections of the EN countries with Russia, China, the US, and the EU. The subsequent section takes a deeper look at the strategic objectives and means of influence of each major actor, comparing these in a systematic way. The following section explores how the growing geopolitical competition in the region has influenced EU policy and how it should be taken into account in EU democracy support. The final section of this report provides policy recommendations for making EU democracy support in the EN more geopolitically resilient.

2 Strategic Posture of the Four Major Actors

2.1 Russia

Russia's role in the EN is defined by its efforts to preserve geopolitical dominance and promote an alternative governance model that challenges Western liberal-democratic norms. Moscow's strategy is rooted in its self-defined security interests and seeks to shape the domestic trajectories of EN countries through a combination of coercion, strategic leverage, and normative counter-models. Russia's actions have consistently undermined democratic development in the region, particularly in countries attempting to integrate with Western institutions, such as the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Strategic Objectives

Russia views the EN as its traditional 'sphere of influence' and a 'buffer zone' critical to its national security doctrine. The 2008 Russian Foreign Policy Concept, reaffirmed in later editions (MFA 2008, 2016), underscores the 'privileged interests' Russia claims in the post-Soviet space. Moscow's real strategic objectives in the EN include:

- **Isolating the 'near abroad' from the West**, preventing the EN countries from joining NATO and the EU;
- **Maintaining political and economic dependence** of the EN states through trade, energy, and financial instruments;
- **Supporting authoritarian resilience** in friendly regimes while destabilising reformist or pro-Western governments;
- **Projecting Russia as a 'global pole'** of conservative, state-centric governance that contrasts with Western liberalism.

To this end, Russia combines hard power with soft and sharp power tactics, targeting domestic institutions, information spaces, and vulnerable political elites. Its broader narrative presents Russia as a defender of

‘traditional values’, ‘national sovereignty’, and ‘multipolarity’. Moscow frames its role in the EN as protecting ‘cultural and civilisational continuity’, meant to justify its expansionism and imperial aspirations, against what it perceives as ‘Western encroachment’. It actively delegitimises liberal reforms as externally imposed and destabilising.

Approaches and Instruments

Russia uses a wide range of instruments to influence EN countries and impede democratic consolidation. These include:

- **Security and military pressure:** Russia’s military posture in the region is central to its strategy. It maintains control over *de facto* occupied territories in Georgia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia), Moldova (Transnistrian region), and Ukraine (Crimea, parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts). These unresolved conflicts serve as levers of destabilisation and create disincentives for democratic consolidation and Euro-Atlantic integration. Russia’s 2008 war with Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and especially the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine exemplify its readiness to use force to reverse democratic trajectories.
- **Support for separatism** (Gretskiy 2025): Through financial, political, and military support to separatist entities, Russia actively undermines state sovereignty and reform processes. These proxies often adopt autocratic governance structures aligned with Russian political models. This strategy serves both to freeze Western integration efforts and to justify Russian intervention under the pretext of ‘protecting Russian speakers’ or preserving regional stability.
- **Energy leverage:** Russia has long used energy dependence as a foreign policy tool. Gazprom’s pricing strategies, supply interruptions, and pipeline politics have been employed to punish reformist governments (e.g., Ukraine 2006, 2009, 2014, and 2015; Georgia 2006) and reward loyal regimes. While several EN countries have diversified energy sources, some remain vulnerable to Russian supply disruptions and pricing manipulation (Miller 2016).
- **Disinformation and propaganda:** Russia uses state-sponsored media (e.g., RT, Sputnik), social media campaigns, and local language platforms to disseminate disinformation, polarise societies, and discredit pro-democracy movements. Its narratives often frame Western support as neo-colonialism, present liberal democracy as chaotic, and promote traditionalism, sovereignty, and Orthodox values as alternatives (Raik et al. 2024a; Mechkova et al. 2020).
- **Economic pressure and incentives:** The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), led by Russia, offers trade and customs incentives to EN countries as an alternative to EU integration. For example, Armenia’s sudden withdrawal from negotiating an AA, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), with the EU in 2013 under Russian pressure demonstrated Moscow’s willingness to use economic threats to steer foreign policy choices. Russia applied various tools of economic coercion—from promises of loans to trade embargoes—against Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.
- **Elite capture and corruption networks:** Russia fosters political capture through oligarchic networks, informal diplomacy, and economic entanglements. It supports authoritarian elites in Belarus and Azerbaijan and builds ties with political actors in other countries who favour closer relations with Moscow. These actors often undermine reforms and promote narratives hostile to liberal democracy.

Impact on Democratic Development

Russia's actions in the EN have had a clearly negative impact on democratic development in most of the EN countries (with a notable exception of Azerbaijan, where Moscow's influence has been more limited and the authoritarian nature of the regime more clearly home-grown). Russian influence has been associated with democratic backsliding, increased elite corruption, institutional erosion, and political polarisation. In Belarus, Russia has supported Lukashenko's authoritarian regime, especially after the 2020 protests, effectively shielding it from the consequences of international isolation. In Ukraine, Russia's intervention since 2014 has not only violated sovereignty but also derailed democratic processes in occupied territories. In Georgia, Russian support for anti-Western parties and manipulation of ethnic minorities in regions like Samtskhe-Javakheti contribute to internal destabilisation. In Moldova, Russia has funded pro-Russian parties and media outlets that attack EU integration efforts and promote clientelist politics.

Despite its coercive power, Russia's normative appeal is limited. Public opinion in most EN countries remains deeply sceptical of Russian intentions.¹ However, in states where pro-democracy movements are weak or suppressed, Russia's model provides a survival toolkit for autocratic elites under pressure.

2.2 China

China's engagement with the EN has expanded significantly over the past decade, albeit with a markedly different approach than that of the EU, the US, or Russia. Unlike the normative or coercive strategies employed by Western actors and Moscow, China pursues a model of pragmatic, interest-based diplomacy that emphasises economic partnership, state sovereignty, and non-interference. While its influence on democratic development is more indirect and ambiguous, Beijing's presence contributes to reshaping governance preferences and power dynamics in the region.

Strategic Objectives

China's overarching strategic aim in the EN region is to expand its global presence and secure economic and geopolitical corridors into Europe. The region forms part of the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWECC), which is one of the key land-based routes of the BRI. By engaging countries in the EN, China seeks to:

- **Secure trade routes and access to European markets** through infrastructure and logistics investments;
- **Gain political influence** in a region where the West and Russia are already competing;
- **Promote its model of development**, which emphasises state-led growth and technological modernisation;

¹ For more nuanced public opinion, see: Gallup, "[Empire's Twilight? Russia Loses Support in Its Own Backyard](#)," May 2023; International Republican Institute, "[National Survey of Moldova](#)," May 2025; Caucasus Research Resource Center, "[Caucasus Barometer 2024 Georgia](#)," May 2024.

- **Build alliances in international organisations** and gather diplomatic support for China's global ambitions (e.g., on Taiwan or Xinjiang-related votes in the United Nations).

China does not aim to displace other actors directly, but rather to position itself as a reliable alternative partner that offers development without political conditions. More broadly, China projects itself as a non-interventionist power that respects sovereignty and refrains from interfering in domestic affairs. Its narrative contrasts sharply with Western conditionality and Russian coercion. Chinese officials emphasise that development should precede democratisation and that stability is a prerequisite for prosperity. This messaging appeals to political elites wary of Western pressures for political reform.

The Chinese model focuses on a strong, centralised state, rapid economic growth, infrastructure investment, and gradual institutional modernisation without liberal pluralism. This model has been described as a form of 'authoritarian developmentalism', which some EN elites view as attractive, especially in states where democratic consolidation is weak or stalled (Zeng 2021).

China avoids overt political alignment but sometimes supports authoritarian stability by default. It refrains from criticising democratic backsliding and offers unconditional engagement. For example, while the EU and the US imposed sanctions after the 2020 crackdown in Belarus, China deepened its economic cooperation with the Lukashenko regime (Mikovic 2025).

Approaches and Instruments

China's toolkit in the EN region is primarily economic, but it is increasingly supported by diplomatic and technological channels. Its major instruments include:

- **Infrastructure investment and connectivity projects:** Through the BRI, China has funded or pledged investments in railways, highways, ports, and energy projects in Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, and Armenia. Notable examples include Chinese involvement in Ukraine's Dnipro Bridge (Zaporizhzhia), Moldova's roads, and Georgia's Anaklia deep-sea port (though the latter project was suspended due to political and geopolitical tensions).
- **Trade and economic agreements:** China has signed memoranda of understanding with most EN countries, seeking to expand market access and integrate regional supply chains with the Chinese industry. Bilateral trade with the region has grown substantially, particularly in sectors like electronics, textiles, and agriculture.
- **Telecommunications and digital technology:** Chinese companies such as Huawei and ZTE are active in building digital infrastructure across the EN, including 4G/5G networks and smart city technologies. These engagements raise concerns about digital surveillance, dependency, and authoritarian tech diffusion (Feldstein 2019; Bader 2025).
- **Educational and cultural diplomacy:** China promotes soft power through Confucius Institutes, scholarships for EN students, media exchanges, and joint academic programmes. These initiatives support elite ties and shape perceptions about China's development model.
- **Vaccine diplomacy and humanitarian aid:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, China delivered vaccines and medical supplies to several EN countries, portraying itself as a generous and efficient global partner.

Impact on Democratic Development

China's impact on democratisation in the EN is ambivalent. It does not directly promote a competing normative agenda or repress civil society, as Russia does, nor does it actively support democratic movements. Instead, its influence is more structural and indirect, shaping governance trajectories through material incentives and elite-level partnerships.

In countries like Georgia and Ukraine, China's economic footprint remains relatively modest, and its political influence is limited. In Moldova and Belarus, Chinese engagement has been welcomed by elites seeking alternative partners to the EU or Russia. However, in none of the EN countries does China directly engage with civil society or democratic institutions.

Analysts argue that China contributes to the 'authoritarian equilibrium' in hybrid regimes by empowering ruling elites through infrastructure financing, technological tools, and diplomatic recognition without requiring reform (Walker and Ludwig 2017). Moreover, Chinese-built surveillance infrastructure and smart cities may enable data control practices that undermine privacy and democratic oversight.

However, it is important to note that China's presence is still developing, and its normative impact is not yet hegemonic. Local populations in the EN continue to favour Western institutions over Chinese ones, especially in Ukraine and Georgia. Moreover, China lacks the linguistic, cultural, and historical proximity that facilitates deeper societal influence in the region.

2.3 The United States

The United States has played a pivotal role in promoting democracy, civil society, and strategic stability in the EN since the early 1990s. While its involvement has varied across presidential administrations, its overarching aim has remained to foster resilient, democratic allies in a region marked by authoritarian pressure and geostrategic competition. The US approach blends normative support for democratic values with a strategic interest in countering authoritarian actors—particularly Russia in the EN region—while maintaining influence in Europe's periphery.

Strategic Objectives

US engagement in the EN prior to 2025 was guided by a dual-purpose strategy: (1) strengthening democratic governance, civil society, and human rights; and (2) resisting authoritarian encroachment by Russia and, increasingly, China. These objectives reflect the post-Cold War consensus that democratic states are more stable, secure, and aligned with US interests. However, the balance between normative democracy promotion and 'realpolitik' varies by administration. In some EN countries (e.g., Azerbaijan), the US also seeks geopolitical, security, and economic interests.

During the early 2000s, under the Bush administration, US strategy was infused with 'freedom agenda' rhetoric, emphasising democratic transformation as a strategic imperative. This approach contributed to strong US backing of the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and the 2004–05 Orange Revolution in Ukraine. The Obama administration continued to support democracy and civil society but was more cautious in its engagement, especially after the 2009 'reset' attempt with Russia. US foreign assistance to Ukraine experienced a substantial increase following Ukraine's 2014 Revolution of Dignity, Russia's annexation of

Crimea, and its military invasion of eastern Ukraine (Gogolashvili and Metreveli 2025). Under the first Trump administration, democracy promotion received less emphasis, although funding for core democracy assistance programmes remained steady. The Biden administration has sought to re-centre democracy in US foreign policy (e.g., Summit for Democracy in 2021), though implementation has lagged behind rhetorical commitment (Carothers and Feldmann 2022). US assistance to Ukraine skyrocketed after Russia's full-scale invasion of the country in 2022.

The US frames its engagement in the EN within a broader liberal internationalist vision, emphasising the intrinsic value of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. While strategic interests often influence its actions, the US consistently highlights the importance of democratic norms as stabilising forces. American policymakers frequently cite the link between governance and security: democracies, they argue, are less prone to conflict and external manipulation. However, critiques exist regarding the selective application of these principles. For instance, Azerbaijan has historically received US security cooperation despite democratic shortcomings, due to its energy resources and role in counter-terrorism. Similarly, while US rhetoric strongly supports Belarusian civil society, practical leverage remains limited. This underscores the tension between normative ideals and geopolitical pragmatism.

Instruments and Mechanisms

The United States channels its influence in the EN through a mix of bilateral diplomacy, foreign assistance, and civil society support. Its key instruments (before 2025) included:

- **USAID**, a principal vehicle for democracy assistance, focuses on elections, media development, anti-corruption, economic policy, public administration reform, civic education, and institutional reform in the justice and law enforcement sectors.
- **NED** and affiliated organisations (the International Republican Institute, IRI; the National Democratic Institute, NDI) support grassroots democracy initiatives, political party training, independent media, and human rights NGOs (particularly impactful in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova).
- **Bilateral assistance and security cooperation.** Beyond civil society programmes, the US also provides military training, defence capacity-building, and support for border security. This dual focus links democracy support with regional security concerns, especially in countries under direct Russian threat.
- **Diplomatic engagement.** US embassies in EN countries have played active roles in supporting electoral processes, public accountability, and mediating political crises (e.g., Georgia's post-election negotiations in 2020–21).
- **Targeted sanctions**, including pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Act. Sanctions on officials and entities in countries like Belarus, Russia, and, recently, Georgia reinforce the normative dimension of its strategy.

Impact on Democratic Development

The US has contributed significantly to civil society resilience, media independence, and electoral integrity in countries like Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia. Democracy assistance programmes have

empowered watchdog groups, fostered investigative journalism, and supported reformist politicians and parties. Unlike the EU, which focuses more on state institutions and legal approximation, the US invests heavily in grassroots- and advocacy-driven democratisation.

In Georgia, US democracy assistance has helped sustain reforms in judicial independence and electoral administration, particularly after the 2003 Rose Revolution. In Ukraine, American support played a vital role in civil society mobilisation before and after the 2013-14 Euromaidan protests. In Moldova, US programmes have aided anti-corruption efforts and media pluralism. In all cases, US pressure and engagement have complemented EU conditionality, especially when domestic political will has been uneven. That said, the effectiveness of US democracy promotion has varied. In contexts of entrenched elite control (e.g., Azerbaijan, Belarus), US leverage is weak, and civil society operates under constant threat. In Ukraine and Georgia, persistent political polarisation and oligarchic influence have limited the long-term sustainability of reforms. Moreover, the absence of a long-term vision for the EN countries—such as security guarantees or deeper economic integration—has led to disillusionment among local pro-democracy actors.

In recent years, Washington has increasingly framed the EN region within the great power competition paradigm (Blocher 2021), focusing on countering Russian and Chinese influence. This shift risks instrumentalising democracy support for geopolitical ends, potentially weakening the credibility of US normative commitments. Nonetheless, the US remains a key ally for democratic actors in the region, particularly during political crises or repression.

2.4 The European Union

The EU has been the most institutionalised and normative external actor in the EN, exerting significant influence through a combination of integration incentives, conditionality, technical assistance, and value-based diplomacy. Its overarching strategy in the region is rooted in the promotion of peace, stability, and prosperity through democratic governance, the rule of law, and market-based reforms. The EU's engagement has been guided primarily by the ENP, launched in 2004, and the EaP, established in 2009. These frameworks offer varying levels of political association and economic integration, including AAs/DCFTAs, and visa liberalisation—all contingent on political and institutional reforms.

Strategic Objectives

The EU's primary goal in the EN has been to create a 'ring of well-governed countries' to its east that are politically stable, economically open, and normatively aligned with European values (European Commission 2004). The EaP offers a differentiated, bilateral track for states like Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine that have signed AAs/DCFTAs, while also maintaining a lower level of bilateral and multilateral dialogue with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus (before the latter suspended its participation in 2021).² The prospect of EU membership has been offered to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

² For more, see: European Council, Council of the European Union, "[Eastern Partnership. Explainers](#)," last modified in February 2025.

The EU's strategic objectives are both normative and pragmatic. Normatively, the EU emphasises democratisation, human rights, civil society empowerment, and anti-corruption reforms. Pragmatically, it seeks to secure energy transit routes, reduce regional instability, and counter external authoritarian influence—primarily that of Russia. The 2016 Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) included a new emphasis on resilience-building in neighbouring states, defining resilience not just as state survival but as the capacity of societies to reform and resist authoritarian reversal.

The EU presents itself as a **normative power**—a promoter of liberal democracy, human rights, and multilateralism (Manners 2002), which is embedded in its identity and external policy discourse. The EU's enlargement experience in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) reinforces the belief in democratic conditionality as a powerful transformation tool. However, the EN context differs substantially: the absence (in the past) of a credible membership perspective weakened the leverage of conditionality, and geopolitical rivalry with Russia complicated the normative agenda. The EU's narrative promotes 'shared values' and 'joint ownership', but its engagement is still largely asymmetrical. EN countries adopt parts of the EU *acquis communautaire* without participation in decision-making. Critics argue that this creates a technocratic and elite-driven reform process, often disconnected from domestic political realities or public support (Delcour 2015).

Instruments and Mechanisms

The EU employs a wide range of instruments in its engagement with EN countries. In particular, the EU:

- **Pursues bilateral agreements with** legally binding reform commitments in areas such as justice, public administration, trade liberalisation, and anti-corruption;
- **Provides financial assistance to** support democratic transition and good governance;
- **Attaches conditionality** to many forms of assistance;
- **Monitors progress** on democratic reform via implementation reports, dialogue platforms, and structured political engagement, including the Association/Cooperation Councils;
- **Promotes institutional alignment** with EU norms by offering expert support through Twinning and Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX) mechanisms, the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), the Civil Society Facility (CSF), and other funding streams;
- **Supports independent media, watchdog organisations, and local advocacy groups** that promote democratic oversight and citizen participation.

Impact on Democratic Development

The EU's influence on democratisation in the EN has been most visible in countries with strong political will and societal demand for reform—notably Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. These countries have undertaken significant legal and institutional reforms under EU guidance, particularly in areas like anti-corruption, public procurement, and judicial independence. The EU has played a key role in supporting electoral integrity through long-term monitoring (e.g., via the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, ODIHR) and post-election assessments.

However, the impact is often limited by **three structural constraints**:

- **Weak conditionality:** In the absence of the ‘golden carrot’ of EU accession, conditionality lacks the transformative power seen during earlier waves of EU enlargement.
- **Geopolitical pushback:** Russian opposition to EU engagement in the EN—especially after the 2013–14 Ukraine crisis—has raised the cost of alignment for partner countries. The annexation of Crimea and conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Donbas are direct results of Russia’s geopolitical resistance to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine’s aspirations to join the EU (and NATO in the case of Georgia and Ukraine) and the attractiveness of European and Euro-Atlantic integration projects.
- **Internal EU ambivalence:** The EU’s own internal fragmentation and crises (e.g., Brexit, erosion of the rule of law in some member states, divisions over migration policy and some aspects of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, CFSP) reduce its coherence and credibility as a democracy promoter.

Despite these limitations, empirical research confirms that EU support has had positive long-term effects on democratic indicators in select countries. Targeted and sustained democracy assistance—particularly when coupled with local demand—can yield measurable improvements in civil society vitality and institutional accountability (Finkel et al. 2007). More recent assessments reaffirm the EU’s normative influence yet highlight the growing challenge of sustaining reforms in increasingly polarised and externally pressured environments (Delcour 2023; Emerson and Kovziridze 2022).

In sum, the EU remains the most comprehensive and consistent democracy supporter in the EN. While its transformative potential is constrained, its emphasis on legal approximation, institutional alignment, and civil society support continues to offer a viable framework for democratic progress—especially when domestic actors are willing and external conditions favourable.

3 Mapping the Geopolitical Landscape

3.1 Political and Security Connections

Russia: Security Dominance and Destabilisation

The EN countries constitute part of what Russia has seen as the ‘near abroad’ for more than three decades—a geopolitical neighbourhood of its special interest (Gretskiy 2025, 6). Maintaining influence in this region to ensure ‘stability’ (as understood in the Kremlin, i.e., the preservation of Russia’s dominance in the ‘former Soviet republics’ and, therefore, resistance to any attempts to replace it with European or Euro-Atlantic integration) has consistently been among the highlights of Russian foreign policy concepts from 2000 to 2023 (Kneuer et al. 2025, 21). In its regional policies, Russia traditionally focused on leverage (vulnerability to external influence, including political and diplomatic pressure) over linkage (density of ties, including political ones) (Buscaneanu 2024, 2-5). The concrete strategies it employs in EN countries fall within the scope of autocracy promotion, while being dependent on their regime types and vary from autocratic consolidation (Azerbaijan and Belarus) to empowerment of autocratic actors and delegitimisation of democracy (Armenia, Georgia, Moldova) or even military aggression (Ukraine) (Kneuer et al. 2025, 2–9). However, it appears that EN countries’ geopolitical orientations are a more determinant factor than regime type in defining the level of their political connections with Russia.

Russia's political connections with the EN are quite diverse, ranging from a close ally (Belarus) to severed diplomatic relations following Russia's military invasion (Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2022).

- Russia's political connections with EU candidate countries (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) have been reduced to a bare minimum in the context of Russia's 2008 war in Georgia and invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, as well as withdrawal of these countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and its agreements in parallel with their progress towards EU accession.³
- Of all EN countries, Belarus thus has the strongest political ties with Russia, as both are part of the Union State, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the CIS, and the EAEU. Unlike other EN countries, Belarus is not a member of the Council of Europe (from which Russia was expelled in 2022). Moreover, complex Russian interference (involving political, financial, security, and propaganda support) could be considered as a major obstacle that prevented Belarus from a democratic transition in 2020.
- Armenia's rather strong political connection with Russia—fostered by its CIS and EAEU memberships—started to fade following the Velvet Revolution of 2018 and in the aftermath of Russia's inaction during the Nagorno-Karabakh offensives in 2020 and 2023. Recently, the ties continued to weaken as Armenia has intensified relations with other global and regional actors and adopted the law on the start of the EU accession process in 2025 (ARKA 2025).
- Russia has been gradually losing its influence on Azerbaijan as well: it remains a CIS member yet lacks interest in a further political alignment with Russia.

In the realm of security, Russia has formalised security dependencies through the presence of peacekeeping forces (Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria), military bases (e.g., the 7th, 4th, and 102nd military bases, respectively, in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Armenia), and regional organisations such as the CSTO, especially with Belarus and Armenia (Gretskiy 2025, 6–9, 19–20; Kneuer et al. 2025, 15–16).

However, attitudes towards the Russian military presence have always varied significantly among the EU neighbouring countries. Mindful of the threats to state security and sovereignty, the Georgian and Moldovan authorities have persistently sought to eliminate it, and so did Ukraine (e.g., the Russian fleet in Crimea in 2004). After the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh and further developments, Armenia suspended its membership in the CSTO (2024); Russian border guards were withdrawn from the Yerevan airport, as well as from the Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Iranian borders (Petersen 2025).

Over the years, Russia stepped up its use of military means and hybrid tactics of destabilisation as its informational, diplomatic, and economic influence waned. These typically involve covert and overt actions, including promoting separatism, undermining electoral integrity, and diffusing disinformation to increase instability and facilitate regime change. However, Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a shift from hybrid attacks to direct military aggression (Gretskiy 2025, 18–22; Kneuer et al. 2025, 21–37).

³ Short of a full formal withdrawal, Moldova has been systematically revoking the principal agreements with CIS.

China: Soft Engagement

China emerged as an actor in the EN region relatively recently, mostly guided by its BRI strategy adopted in 2013. Thus, its interest has been mainly economic, as EN countries lack close geographical or historical ties with China. However, they have been eager to develop connections with China to balance Russian influence and Western conditionality (Bader 2025, 2–9).

China has established strategic partnerships with Belarus (2013), Ukraine (2013), Georgia (2023), Armenia (2025), and Azerbaijan (2025). Of all EN countries, China maintains the closest political ties with Belarus; the relationship was upscaled to ‘all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership’ in 2023. Belarus remains the only EN member to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), while Armenia and Azerbaijan are among SCO dialogue partners (and expressed their interest in upgrading their SCO status to membership). Moreover, Armenia and Belarus are members of the EAEU, which actively develops cooperation with the BRI.

China’s security presence in the EN is minor compared to that of Russia, the US, or the EU. Its foreign policy agenda is based on the principle of a ‘Global Community of Shared Future’, which emphasises state sovereignty and non-interference, in line with its Global Security Initiative (GSI), and rejects alliance-based security mechanisms (State Council of the People’s Republic of China 2023). Initially, China’s interest in the region was limited to military technology exports from Ukraine. Only with the launch of the BRI in 2013 did China ‘discover’ the other EN countries.

Ukraine has been the third-largest supplier, delivering more than 35% of its weapons exports to China between 2016 and 2020, including components for China’s first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning. Belarus has prioritised military cooperation and military-technical cooperation in its relations with China, including by hosting joint military exercises. Armenia and Azerbaijan have both purchased weapons and received military aid from China, while Armenian troops have also received training. However, China has refrained from directly engaging in regional conflicts and avoided challenging Russia’s security dominance, making itself an unreliable security partner for many EN countries (Bader 2025).

A significant area of China’s influence in security is the spread of dual-use digital surveillance technologies—‘secure’ or ‘smart’ city systems and digital forensic tools, developed by firms like Meiya Pico—that are applied to monitor citizens and suppress political opponents (Bader 2025, 17–19).⁴ Chinese telecommunication companies are heavily involved in innovative city network infrastructure and projects across the EN (including Huawei’s work on 4G in Kyiv’s subway and 5G roll-outs in Belarus, as well as ZTE’s involvement in Armenia and Georgia).

The US: Varied Ambitions and Security Support

The US has diplomatic relations with all EN states, yet the strength and quality of these relations vary over time and across countries depending, in particular, on the ambitions of each US presidential administration, as well as factors including the country’s strategic significance to the US, the degree of Euro-Atlantic aspirations and political ties with Russia (Gogolashvili and Metreveli 2025). Thus, support for the territorial integrity, democratic development, and EU accession aspirations of EN states (notably Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) has been undisputable. The US established strategic partnerships with Ukraine (2008), Georgia

⁴ See, for example: M. Gvazdabia, “[Georgian Dream is watching: how AI-powered surveillance is used against Tbilisi protesters](#),” OC Media, 29 May 2025; Governance Monitoring Center, J. Dowsett, “[Georgia’s Surveillance Surge: Chinese Cameras Spark Protest Crackdown Fears](#),” OCCRP, 29 March 2025.

(2009), and Armenia (2025). Ukraine and Georgia have also aspired to join NATO and have intensified dialogue with it. Moreover, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, USAID has been operating assistance programmes to EN countries from 1992 to 2025.

The US commitment to security issues in the region has oscillated through various presidential administrations. The George W. Bush administration boldly promoted democracy and the US economic/geopolitical interests, including Caspian energy as well as the idea of eventual NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, while the Obama administration, initially seeking a ‘reset’ in relations with Russia, later saw a growing threat from it, in particular after the 2014 invasion of Ukraine. It committed to supporting Euro-Atlantic integration and the defence of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (The White House 2015). The first Trump administration’s 2017 National Security Strategy (The White House 2017) condemned Russia’s redrawing of borders in Georgia and Ukraine, but left space for cooperation with Russia. The Biden administration (The White House 2022) strengthened the US presence in the region by forming a coalition to protect Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and reaffirming support for the European integration of EN countries.

The EU: Conditional Ties and Growing Security Engagement

All EN countries except Belarus are involved in the EaP (launched in 2009) and the European Political Community (EPC, launched in 2022) initiatives. In addition to bilateral bodies foreseen by the EU’s association (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (European Union 2014a; 2014b; 2014c)) and partnership agreements (Armenia and Azerbaijan), the EU has dedicated missions deployed in Armenia (EUMA), Georgia (EUMM), Moldova (EUBAM), and Ukraine (EUAM and EUBAM), as well as the mandate of the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia. Moreover, since 2016, the Jean Monnet Dialogue for Peace and Democracy has been ongoing between the European and Ukrainian parliaments.

Half of the EN countries received EU candidate status: Georgia (2023), Moldova (2022), and Ukraine (2022). Accession negotiations with Moldova and Ukraine have been in progress since 2024, while their AAs have been in full force since 2016 and 2017, respectively. Moldova was the first of the EN countries to host the EPC summit in 2023. Georgia’s accession process was frozen in 2024 following a democratic decline. The EU was unable to prevent this backsliding, orchestrated by the ruling Georgian Dream party, due to reduced leverage following the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, along with insufficient scope, communication, and belated timing of the EU’s relevant policies (Weilandt 2025a).

The non-EU candidate EN countries find themselves rather far from the EU accession perspective.

- In 2013, Russia leveraged the non-signing of the AAs by both Armenia and Ukraine. However, unlike Ukraine, Armenia has not yet advanced back to this stage of EU integration, despite the positive effects of the 2018 Velvet Revolution on democratisation and rule of law, primarily because of its membership in Russia-led alliances. Currently, the EU-Armenia relations are regulated by the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in force since 2021 (European Union 2018), which replaced the previous Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) of 1999 (European Union 1999b).
- Political relations between the EU and Azerbaijan are more restricted due to the latter’s autocratic regime and are still guided by the bilateral PCA of 1999 (European Union 1999a).
- In the other EN autocracy, Belarus, the PCA signed in 1995 was never ratified by the EU. Polls show that Belarusian public opinion regarding either the EU integration or unification with Russia was quite divided in 2006–20, while pro-EU sentiments prevailed only in 2010–14 (Rudkouski

2021, 104–6). Following the crackdown of the 2020 protests, mass human rights violations, and exodus of numerous civil society activists, the EU further reduced its relations with the Belarusian authorities and redirected its support to Belarus' civil activists and political opposition in exile.

The European Union's security engagement with EN countries has deepened since the 2010s and has transformed fundamentally after 2022. The EU security strategy has been labelled as normative and civilian, with the focus on conflict mediation, confidence-building, monitoring missions, and promoting stability via institutional structures and funding (Gressel 2020). The AAs with Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova intensified political and security cooperation and introduced additional security provisions, covering terrorism, cyber and hybrid threats, and had incremental approximation with the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and broader conflict prevention and crisis management cooperation (Akhvlediani 2019). The 2016 EUGS strengthened the EU's role as a security provider, with an emphasis on developing resilience in the neighbourhood (EEAS 2016).

However, particularly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU's approach has moved from a primarily economic and political framework of soft cooperation towards a structured security policy addressing regional instability and Russian aggression. The adoption of the Strategic Compass in 2022 led to the establishment of new and adjusted security and defence partnerships, reflecting the EU's ambition for greater strategic autonomy (Lazarou and Politis Lamprou 2025). For instance, the synchronisation of the Ukrainian and Moldovan electricity grids with the European continental network in March 2022 was an instance of pragmatic security cooperation (European Commission 2022). In addition, the EU and its Member States have mobilised €59.6 billion in military aid to Ukraine (2022–mid-2025) (European Commission 2025a). The EU is further supporting Ukraine with non-lethal and lethal weapons and training through the European Peace Facility (EPF). At the same time, Armenia has made noticeable efforts to diversify its security partnerships, hosting an EU monitoring mission on its border with Azerbaijan and seeking the acquisition of French armoured vehicles and radar systems (EEAS 2025; Antonyan 2024).

3.2 Economic Links

Russia: Entrenched Economic Dependence

Russia is a significant economic player in several EN countries, but the nature and intensity of economic relations vary across them. In particular, for Belarus and Armenia, Russia is a leading economic partner, with its influence exerted through trade, energy supplies and subsidies, investment, remittances, etc.

- The interconnection between Belarus and Russia, facilitated by the Union State and the EAEU, combined with Russian investments in key sectors, strengthens this dependence. Russia accounted for more than 50% of Belarus's trade turnover, reaching 62% in 2022. In Armenia, also an EAEU member, Russia accounted for 36% of the total trade turnover in 2022 (Kneuer et al. 2025, 37).
- Through its 'debt-for-assets' policy, Russia was able to acquire ownership of strategic infrastructure such as Beltransgaz, Belgazprombank, Armenian railways, and Gazprom Armenia, as well as power plants and telecommunications, thereby ensuring its economic presence in these countries (Gretskiy 2025, 15–16; Kneuer et al. 2025, 27).

As for the Associated Trio (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), divergent trends are observed:

- Since 2013, after the Georgian Dream came to power, Georgia has begun to restore and strengthen its trade and economic ties with Russia. In 2022, imports from Russia to Georgia grew by 79%

compared to 2021 and amounted \$1.8 billion, while Russia's share of total imports increased to 13.6%, reaching its highest level in 17 years (Allahverdiyev and Mustafayev 2023, 6).

- By contrast, Ukraine and Moldova have been reducing their economic dependence on Russia since 2014 and diversifying their economic ties with the EU.

Moscow has often used trade restrictions and gas prices as economic leverage in response to the pro-Western policies. In the energy sector, Russia has systematically leveraged its role as the primary supplier of fossil fuels with preferential pricing as a tool to secure geopolitical loyalty—particularly among post-Soviet states, whose industrial and energy sectors remain heavily dependent on Russian resources (Gretskiy 2025, 7). This trend culminated in the end of Russian gas transit through Ukraine to Moldova in 2025, significantly affecting Moldova's relationship with Russia (Jayanti 2025).

By contrast, access to energy resources and established routes for energy exports to Türkiye and Europe have allowed Azerbaijan to become the only country in the EN to largely bypass Russia's energy influence.

China: Expanding Infrastructure and Trade

China emphasises economic ties with the EN countries, which distinguishes its approach from those of Russia, the EU, and the US. These relations are driven mainly by Beijing's pursuit of its economic interests and the BRI, which has brought the region to the forefront due to its geostrategic position linking China to Europe. While overall trade volumes of EN countries with China are lower than their trade with the EU or Russia, the pace of growth is notable (Kneuer et al. 2025, 47), particularly in the case of Ukraine, where China became its largest export partner in 2019 (Ukraine played an important role in China's food security) and first trading partner in 2022 (Bader 2025, 13).

At the same time, China's foreign direct investment (FDI) accounts for only a small portion of the total FDI in the EN countries. Chinese investments and loans tend to have fewer oversight requirements than Western assistance, which is attractive to some EN governments, despite transparency and debt issues (e.g., lending from China accounted for 20% of Belarus's external debt in 2019 (Jakóbowski and Kłysiński 2021, 23)).

As trade of the EN countries with China has increased, there has been a significant imbalance favouring China (except for Ukraine). Belarus, a key transit state of the BRI, hosts the China-Belarusian Industrial Park, while China served as Georgia's largest export market in 2022 (OEC 2025). Large infrastructure projects in Georgia are sometimes linked to corruption and elite capture by Chinese contractors. Azerbaijan, like Georgia, is seeking to become a participant in the BRI corridor, with growing non-oil trade. At the same time, Armenia has China as its second-largest trading partner, while Moldova has relatively limited economic relations (Kneuer et al. 2025, 38–47; Bader 2025, 12–17).

The US: Targeted Engagement

Although the US is not a major trading partner for most EN countries, it has a substantial economic presence in the region, driven primarily by strategic interests and implemented through foreign aid. Meant to promote economic stability, sustainable development, diversification of economies, improve business climate, and enhance transit potential, US assistance in the EN focuses on agriculture (Armenia, Moldova), energy security (Azerbaijan, Ukraine), infrastructure development (Armenia, Georgia, Moldova), trade, private and financial sectors (Gogolashvili and Metreveli 2025, 14–22). It is also linked to democracy promotion and development goals such as reducing poverty, as well as strengthening good governance, transparency, and accountability. The amount and relative priorities of US economic assistance vary across countries and over time, depending

on specific circumstances, policy considerations, and recipients' willingness to implement reforms. The US economic relations in the EN are shaped by global competition with China and Russia, as well as the region's geopolitical value as a 'buffer zone' (The White House 2022, 8, 25–27).

The EU: Trade Assistance and Conditionality

The EU establishes its economic connections with the EN through trade, investment, and development assistance. The EU's policy aims to create market opportunities, provide financial support, and foster sectoral cooperation. This approach imposes conditionality to stimulate economic modernisation, support governance reform, and enhance connectivity, ultimately promoting democratic development. However, persistent challenges, including trade imbalances, limited diversification, and external geopolitical pressures, continue to limit the depth of economic integration.

The EU remains a leading economic partner for EN countries, providing the largest share of total trade in 2021 to Moldova (49.1%), Azerbaijan (44.8%), Ukraine (39.6%), and Georgia (21.1%). For Belarus and Armenia, the EU was the second-largest trading partner, accounting for 18.9-19.9% of total trade (Grodzicki 2022, 149–150).

Trade statistics since 2010 show that the implementation of the AAs (including their DCFTA provisions) concluded with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine has contributed to institutional alignment and a significant increase in trade. Moldova and Ukraine have experienced a marked increase in exports to the EU, making it their priority export market (European Union 2014a; 2014b; 2014c). Meanwhile, Armenia has strengthened its ties with the EU through the CEPA (European Union 2018), diversifying its economic relations while maintaining membership in the EAEU. By comparison, the economic relations between Azerbaijan and its largest economic partner—the EU—are regulated by the PCA (European Union 1999b). They involve significant trade and investment, particularly in the energy sector, as Azerbaijan is a key pipeline gas supplier to the EU (European Commission 2024, 7, 16).

In addition to trade, the EU provides substantial financial assistance and investments to the EN. In sum, Ukraine received the largest share of both among the EN countries in 2010–24, with the largest net FDI inflow in 2021 (€6.4 billion). Until 2017, Azerbaijan had a positive net inflow of FDI, with the highest in 2016 (€1.7 billion); since 2018, net direct investments have become negative. Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova showed less variation in trends with a positive balance of FDI flows in 2010–23, registering €1.8, €0.9, and €0.5 billion, for each country, respectively, in 2022 (Eurostat 2025c).

EU official development assistance data (2010–22) reveals that 'Government and Civil Society' is consistently the primary sector in all countries, supporting democratic reforms and governance. 'General Budget Support' is highlighted in Ukraine, especially in the context of crisis response, but is also significant in Moldova. 'Transport and Storage' investments are crucial for connectivity in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Overall, EU policy exhibits strategic developments, prioritising civil society and crisis management after 2020, which diverges from pre-2020 emphases on state-building and economic modernisation. While the EU demonstrates policy coherence in sectoral directions of its financial assistance, it may be subject to limitations in responding to country-specific contexts (OECD 2024; Aleksanyan et al. 2024).

3.3 Societal Connections

Russia: Diasporas, Narratives, Culture

Russia is home to significant diasporas from each of the EN countries: according to the 2021 census, at least 946,172 Armenians, 884,007 Ukrainians, 474,576 Azerbaijanis, 208,048 Belarusians, 112,765 Georgians, and 77,509 Moldovans lived in Russia (Rosstat 2022). The current figures for these diasporas could be significantly higher.⁵ Moreover, societal connections between Russia and the EN are reinforced as Russian nationals may travel visa-free to all EN countries (except Ukraine), and all EN country nationals may enter Russia visa-free.⁶

Russia's narratives in the EN countries exemplify its broader strategic political objectives and could be grouped into four: 'decadent and declining West'; 'historical unity with Russia'; 'Russia provides security, the West stokes conflict'; and 'Western-imposed democracy' (Raik et al. 2024a, 2–6). These narratives are confrontational towards the West, indirectly criticising it as well as connecting anti-Western, anti-EU and anti-democratic rhetoric, thus hampering EU democracy promotion efforts. In the EN, they are most present in Belarus (where they are largely uncontested in public discourse) and Moldova (where they are fiercely contested), and least present in Azerbaijan (*ibid.*, 7–27).

The institutional tools of expanding Russia's linguistic, cultural, and informational influence abroad, particularly in EN countries, include the state agency *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the public *Russkiy Mir* Foundation (Gretskiy 2025, 12–4). Along with Russian state-owned media, especially TV channels, they have been the major instruments of Russia's disinformation abroad since their establishment in 2007–08, and subsequently came under sanctions by the EU, as well as individual EU and EN states. For instance, revocation of broadcasting licenses of Russian TV channels was performed by Moldova in 2022, and has been periodically discussed in Armenia since 2019 (*ibid.*, 11). Broadcasting bans are in force in Ukraine (2014) and Georgia (2008), with some restrictions also introduced in Azerbaijan (2007). With the caveat of internet broadcasting, this means that of all EN countries, Russian television directly reaches the audiences only in Armenia and Belarus, which limits Russia's influence via the societal connections with the EN countries.

Russia's foreign policy concepts have underlined the 'paramount importance of preserving the rights of Russian compatriots living abroad, particularly in relation to language, culture, and education' (Kneuer et al. 2025, 21). Before 2022, the concept of *Russkiy mir* (Russian world) had been central to Russia's soft power, combining manifestations of geopolitical sympathies towards Russia, Soviet conservatism, and moral traditionalism. In certain geographies, including several EN countries (most notably, Belarus), coupled with the popularity of the Russian language and culture, close ties with Russia and its informational presence, it represented an influential cultural option (Rudkouski 2021, 104).

Russia's external actions and inaction, especially political and security-related, may have substantial effects on the country's perception by EN societies. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 drastically diminished the soft power of 'Russophilia', practically destroying the *Russkiy mir* concept. It also had profound effects on Russia's societal connections with the EN, due to ruptures of millions of ties between families and friends in Ukraine and Russia, coupled with the exodus of at least 800,000 people from Russia in 2022–23 (Kamalov et al. 2025, 5), many of whom initially moved to Armenia and Georgia, along with increased repatriation rates of labour migrants from Russia, including those originally from the EN countries. Moreover, following Russia's *de facto* inaction given Azerbaijan's offensives in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020

⁵ Considering, in particular, that over 16.5 million people did not indicate their ethnicity during this census (*ibid.*) and that the number of people with Ukrainian ethnicity in Russia has significantly increased due to forced migration following the full-scale war in Ukraine.

⁶ Including Georgian citizens since 2023.

and 2023, the number of Armenian people having a positive view of relations with Russia plummeted from 93% in October 2019 to 31% in December 2023 (Weilandt 2025b, 26).

China: Boosting Cultural and Mobility Ties

China aims to foster ‘positive public perceptions through the engagement of citizens, elites, and the media’ (Bader 2025, 19). For China as an authoritarian gravity centre, ideological narratives are among the few means of projecting its governance model externally (Kneuer et al. 2025, 2). Nevertheless, so far, its propaganda and narratives—broadly summarised as ‘China as a positive alternative’—are not widely present in the EN (Raik et al. 2024a, 2). Out of all EN countries, they are most visible in Georgia, uncriticised by its government (*ibid.*, 23), which feeds its civil society’s concern about the risk of using educational cooperation for the diffusion of an ‘overtly China-friendly narrative’ (Bader 2025, 21). Meanwhile, Belarus appeared to be the most receptive to Chinese narratives among the EN countries (Raik et al. 2024a, 24).

Compared to EN societal connections with Russia, the EU, and the US, Chinese soft power in the region is a new and limited yet growing phenomenon. In recent years, China has given significant attention to its people-to-people relations, particularly with the South Caucasus countries, by strengthening not only social, cultural, and educational ties (Confucius Institutes operate in all EN countries); it has also been expending in areas such as technology, media, tourism, healthcare, arts, as well as humanitarian aid (Guliyev 2023). Citizens’ mobility is another important aspect: Chinese nationals may travel visa-free to all EN countries (except Moldova), while citizens of the EN countries (except Moldova and Ukraine) may enter China without a visa.

The US: Civil Society and Migration

The principal dimensions of American societal connections with the EN countries include civil society assistance, mobility, and diaspora linkages. While the efficiency of the US foreign assistance to the EN remains debated, resilient civil society is among the specific areas where its impact on democratisation was successful in non-autocratic EN countries. These include the empowering of civil society as well as youth civic engagement in Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine (Gogolashvili and Metreveli 2025).

In terms of mobility, while all EN country nationals need visas to enter the US, American nationals may travel visa-free to all EN states (except Azerbaijan and Belarus). The Ukrainian diaspora in the US is the biggest of the EN countries: some 1.38 million people in 2023, born in the US or Ukraine (Migration Policy Institute 2024). Approximately 700,000 people from the EN countries lived in the US in 2023: 100,827 people born in Armenia; 25,508 in Azerbaijan; 72,047 in Belarus; 29,929 in Georgia; 54,103 in Moldova; and 410,138 in Ukraine (United States Census Bureau 2024). In addition, university education, including student exchanges, provides a valuable contribution to the US-EN societal connections: during the 2022–23 academic year, 4,795 students from the EN were enrolled in the US schools (Institute of International Education 2024a),⁷ which is 18 times more than the number of Americans (258) studying in the EN countries (Institute of International Education 2024b).

⁷ If calculated *per capita*, the highest percentage of such students came from Georgia and Armenia, followed by Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus. In absolute numbers, most of such EN students came from Ukraine (2,072), followed by Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Belarus, and Moldova.

The EU: Prioritising Linkages

As the EU has consistently focused on expanding linkage rather than leverage in its relations with the EN since the 1990s (Buscaneanu 2024, 2), it has paid particular attention to the societal connections. For instance, bilateral Civil Society Platforms have been established under each of the agreements (AAs and CEPA) between the EU and the EN countries (except for Azerbaijan and Belarus).⁸

In recent years, Europe's societal connections with Ukraine and Belarus have significantly increased. Close to a million people escaped from Belarus after the crackdown on the 2020 protests and repressions that followed.⁹ Furthermore, after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, over 4.2 million (as of April 2025) Ukrainian refugees received temporary protection status in the EU, half of them in Germany and Poland (Eurostat 2025b).

Visa liberalisation regimes and mobility programmes also contribute to strengthening EU-EN societal connections. Georgian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian nationals enjoy short-term visa-free travel to the EU, while EU nationals have visa waivers in all EN countries except Azerbaijan. Moldova was the first EN country to benefit from this visa-free regime in 2015, followed by Georgia and Ukraine in 2018 (Buscaneanu 2024, 3). In addition to dozens of thousands of EN nationals (especially from Ukraine and Belarus) enrolled in EU universities, the Erasmus+ programme has further expanded academic mobility between the EU and EN, with seven thousand EU students and three times as many EN students having benefited from it in 2022–24 (European Commission 2025b).

4 The Four Major Actors: A Comparison

4.1 Convergences and Divergences in Strategic Objectives and Tools

While all four actors (Russia, China, the US, and the EU) engage in the EN for strategic reasons, their objectives diverge considerably in terms of their normative underpinnings and desired regional order.

- **The EU and the US** converge on promoting a liberal international order characterised by democratic governance, rule of law, and human rights. Their overarching vision is that democracy fosters stability, prosperity, and alignment with the West. However, even among these actors, there are differences: the EU emphasises institutional alignment and legal approximation (through the EaP and AAs/DCFTAs), whereas the US prioritises civil society resilience, media freedom, and security cooperation (Finkel et al. 2007; Carothers and Feldmann 2022).
- **Russia's** objectives sharply contrast with those of the EU and the US. Its central aim is to preserve a sphere of influence and prevent further Euro-Atlantic integration. Moscow promotes a multipolar world order in which regional hegemons—like Russia—*de facto* enjoy veto power over their neighbours' foreign policy orientations. Democratic transitions that threaten Russia's

⁸ Belarus does not have such an agreement in force. Azerbaijan's PCA with the EU of 1999 does not contain a single mention of 'civil society'.

⁹ Based on the statistics on the EU first residence permits issued to Belarus citizens, with 743,047 of such permits issued in 2021-23 alone (Eurostat 2025a).

authoritarian allies or challenge its geopolitical interests are seen as existential threats (Delcour 2015; Mechkova et al. 2020).

- **China's** goals, in comparison, are more economically focused and less overtly ideological. Its engagement aims to secure trade routes, infrastructure connectivity, and diplomatic neutrality from the EN states. While China avoids directly undermining democracy, it reinforces a development-first model that sidelines democratic reforms, particularly through state-to-state relations and authoritarian-friendly technologies (Feldstein 2019; Zeng 2021).

Thus, the EN finds itself at the intersection of value-based, interest-based, and coercive geopolitical agendas. Consequently, EN countries must navigate between Western expectations, Chinese alternatives, and Russian threats, often creating tensions and contradictions in their foreign and domestic policies.

The instruments used by each actor also differ, reflecting their strategic cultures and normative frameworks.

- **The EU** relies on soft power, legal conditionality, and technical assistance. Its power lies in regulatory alignment and economic incentives, especially through the promise of closer integration and access to the EU market. Tools like AAs and Twinning support long-term institutional convergence.
- **The US** mixes soft and hard power, combining civil society support with military cooperation, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions. It intervenes more actively during crises and backs political pluralism through support to civil society actors, including watchdogs and independent media.
- **Russia** employs coercive tools, including military interventions, energy blackmail, disinformation campaigns, and elite capture. Its approach is reactive and security-centred, aimed at weakening state sovereignty and fostering dependency.
- **China's** engagement is transactional. It uses infrastructure finance, technology transfer, trade, and elite-level diplomacy to expand influence. It avoids direct interference but builds structural dependencies through debt, digital infrastructure, and bilateral economic agreements.

While EU and US approaches support systemic democratic transformation, Russia seeks to reverse it, and China remains agnostic but creates enabling environments for authoritarian entrenchment.

4.2 Influence of Democratisation

The democratic impacts of external engagement vary widely depending on the actor, the EN country, and the political context of their interactions.

- **Positive democratic influence:** The EU and the US have made significant contributions to democratisation in Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Armenia at a later stage. EU conditionality has promoted judicial, anti-corruption, and electoral integrity reforms. US support has empowered civil society, media, and democratic movements (Finkel et al. 2007; Emerson and Kovziridze 2022). However, the sustainability of reforms is often challenged by internal resistance and geopolitical backlashes.

- **Negative influence:** Russia has consistently undermined EN democratisation, including through its support for authoritarian regimes (Belarus), fomenting separatism among the Russian-speaking population of those EN countries pursuing closer integration with the EU, and disinformation. It reinforces political clientelism, weak institutions, and polarisation (Mechkova et al. 2020).
- **Ambivalent influence:** China's influence is rather non-ideological but problematic in terms of norm diffusion. While not actively promoting autocracy, China supports regimes regardless of their democratic credentials and empowers elite control through surveillance technologies and infrastructure diplomacy (Feldstein 2019; Walker and Ludwig 2017). This 'authoritarian neutrality' risks entrenching hybrid regimes.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of external influence depends on domestic agency. In countries with strong pro-reform coalitions (e.g., post-2014 Ukraine), Western support has had a more transformative impact. By contrast, where elites resist democratisation or align with authoritarian models (e.g., Belarus, Azerbaijan), external support has a limited effect or even backfires.

5 Adapting EU Democracy Support to Geopolitical Competition

5.1 How Geopolitical Competition Has Shaped EU Policy Towards the EN

The growing geopolitical competition in the EN region was initially not factored into EU policy. Until recent years, the EU did not aim to be a geopolitical actor—on the contrary, it objected to the very idea of geopolitical competition. The EU's foreign policy was built on the liberal rules-based order, emphasising norms-based cooperation and multilateralism (Tocci 2017). The Union used to reject the geopolitical realist understanding that international relations are unavoidably dominated by great power rivalry and zero-sum competition. The ENP was created with an aspiration of having countries on the EU's borders that are peaceful, well-governed, and prosperous, thus constituting a 'ring of friends' (European Commission 2004). The EU's approach to the new eastern neighbours was, in important respects, similar to its policy towards candidate countries, emphasising the normative agenda of democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and good governance.

Geopolitical considerations were, likewise, absent from the EU's rhetoric. The EU did not wish to enter geopolitical competition with Russia over the 'shared neighbourhood'—the very idea was alien to the EU's foreign policy identity. However, as the EU gradually increased its involvement in the EN countries, Russia did view this through the lens of zero-sum competition. The tensions were reinforced by the growing contradiction between the EU's democracy promotion policy and Russia's drift towards an increasingly authoritarian system. Furthermore, the EU stressed that neighbouring countries should be sovereign in making their foreign policy choices, while Russia put pressure on its neighbours to join its regional integration projects in an effort to regain control over post-Soviet states. Values, norms, and geopolitical competition became intertwined in the regional dynamics in a manner that the EU was unprepared to address. The EU's efforts to underline that its policies were not directed against anyone and did not aim to create new dividing lines in Europe failed to convince the Kremlin.

The war in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the start of the invasion in eastern Ukraine the same year exposed Russia's aggressive geopolitical agenda, leading to some adjustments in the EU's

policy towards the EN and Russia. The EU promptly condemned the illegal annexation of Crimea and introduced sanctions against Russia. However, it did not wish to become directly involved in the conflict and did not take an active role in the resolution process. The EU lacked both political will and tools to address the growing tensions between Ukraine and Russia (Freyburg et al. 2024). Although the ‘peacebuilding component’ gained significant prominence in EU democracy funding after 2014, it still lacked consistency and strategy (*ibid.*).

It took the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia for the EU to substantially change its approach to the EN region. The EU could no longer stay away from the geopolitical conflict, but took the side of Ukraine and mobilised the whole CFSP toolbox to support its fight for independence, including through military assistance, and to impose costs on the aggressor. Ukraine’s right to integrate with the EU was finally acknowledged by granting it a candidate country status in June 2022. Russia was defined as the biggest threat to peace and stability in Europe. The dramatic events of 2022 forced the EU to become a security actor in the biggest geopolitical conflict in Europe since the Second World War.

At the same time, these events exposed the limits of the EU’s ability to defend its values and interests in the dramatically worsened security environment, where multipolar competition was on the rise and the rules-based order under severe pressure. There was a new ‘demand for a more geopolitical Europe’ (Orenstein 2023), but it was often unclear what the ‘geopolitical EU’ should look like. Nor was there a consensus among scholars as to whether it had started to emerge (Kundnani 2023). The return of geopolitical rivalry undermined the very foundation of the EU’s self-understanding as an exceptional international actor that rejected zero-sum rivalry (Della Sala 2023). Hardly anyone calling for a geopolitical EU meant that it should (or could) mirror the Russian effort to impose its sphere of influence by force and deny the sovereign rights of its neighbours. Geopolitics, as practised by the EU, was meant to be something different from the realist zero-sum competition pursued by Russia. **The EN region is arguably a test case of whether the EU can enter a geopolitical conflict and, at the same time, maintain its commitment to European values and respect for international norms.**

Although geopolitical competition was not explicitly considered in EU policymaking, it did have an impact on the EU’s democracy support. Earlier research documented a notable increase in overall democracy assistance for the region during 2005–22 (Rabinovych and Kimmel 2025). However, there was no clear pattern of either a strategic approach or the EU’s reactivity to external events that would explain the shifts in different country cases (*ibid.*). In the case of Ukraine, though, there was a substantial increase in democracy support projects that involved peacebuilding after 2014, showing the EU’s growing attention to the security situation and its implications for democratisation.

Since 2022, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and further increase of geopolitical tensions in the region, accompanied by the EU’s aspiration to be a stronger geopolitical actor, have raised concerns that this could lead the EU to compromise on values in an effort to prioritise security considerations (e.g., Blockmans 2022). There are examples of the EU downplaying democratic decline in neighbouring countries due to its reading of the geopolitical environment, even before 2022.

For instance, in the case of Armenia, the Velvet Revolution of 2018 brought to power new leadership that was willing to reject autocracy, develop closer relations with the EU, and reduce the country’s dependence on Russia. The EU embraced this reorientation and was very restrained in criticising democratic backsliding (Weilandt 2025b, 51).

In the case of Georgia, when authoritarian tendencies slowly gathered pace under the rule of the Georgian Dream party from 2012 onwards, the EU maintained a cordial relationship with the government up until 2024, when the autocratic nature of the regime became ever more pronounced. The EU was concerned that it ‘could have pushed the country further away and potentially into a rapprochement with Russia’ (*ibid.*, 52). This approach culminated in granting Georgia a candidate country status in 2023, soon to be followed by a further crackdown on democracy and civil society by the government, coupled with hostile rhetoric towards the West and resulting in the decision to pause accession talks with the EU.

In a similar vein, Belarus could serve as a cautionary tale emphasising the futility of the EU’s democracy promotion efforts if a genuine desire to engage and reform is missing on behalf of the country’s leadership.¹⁰

In the case of Ukraine, the EU’s attention since February 2022 has shifted to assisting the country’s efforts to defend itself against military aggression. At the same time, however, the progress of domestic reforms remained under scrutiny, especially following the candidate country status and Ukraine’s aspiration to EU membership. The EU is in a new situation, having a candidate country that is at war with a neighbouring major power and faces serious long-term security challenges. It is a subject of debate whether, in these circumstances, the EU has been too soft with regard to democratic conditionality and continuing shortcomings of democracy and the rule of law in Ukraine, or whether a less demanding approach to democratic reforms was justified and even necessary in the context of war.¹¹ So far, a swift reaction by the EU and Ukraine’s civil society in 2025 to an attempt to reverse the anti-corruption reforms by undermining the independence of the relevant agencies underscores the importance of maintaining vigilance.

5.2 Strategic Challenges and Policy Dilemmas

Despite the EU and US’s democracy support, democratic development in the EN remains fragile and uneven. This section summarises several structural and strategic dilemmas, underpinned by geopolitical competition, that complicate democracy promotion efforts and limit the transformative power of external influence. In particular, the primary threats to security and sovereignty revolve around:

Hybrid Regimes and Democratic Stagnation

Many EN countries can be placed in a ‘grey zone’ between authoritarianism and liberal democracy. They exhibit features of both models, such as competitive elections and pluralistic media, alongside elite capture, selective justice, and weak institutional independence. These hybrid regimes are resilient due to entrenched interests, external enablers (Russia, China), and the strategic ambiguity of their elites.

External democracy promoters often struggle to identify reliable reform partners, especially in political systems where electoral victories do not lead to genuine reform. For example, while Georgia and Moldova have experienced pro-European political transitions, institutional change has often stalled or reversed when

¹⁰ See, for example: E. Korosteleva, “[The EU and Belarus: seizing the opportunity?](#)” *Sieps* Issue 2016:13epa (November 2016).

¹¹ This issue came to broader public attention when the Ukrainian government attempted to bring independent anti-corruption bodies under government control but backtracked following a backlash. See: O. Sukhov, “[The crackdown on Ukraine’s anti-corruption agencies, explained](#),” *The Kyiv Independent*, July 2025; “[Ukraine: New Law Undercuts Independence of Anti-Corruption Bodies](#),” *Human Rights Watch*, July 2025.

new elites consolidate power. This creates frustration among Western donors and reduces the credibility of conditionality.

Authoritarian Influence and Strategic Adaptation

Russia and, to a lesser extent, China exploit institutional weaknesses in EN states to promote competing normative agendas and undermine democratic consolidation. Russia employs hybrid warfare, disinformation, and elite co-optation to destabilise pro-Western governments. China's influence is more benign in tone but can enable authoritarian drift by empowering regimes that resist democratic accountability (Walker and Ludwig 2017).

EN governments sometimes strategically adapt to these dynamics—playing external actors against each other to extract resources without meaningful reform. This tactic of 'multi-vector foreign policy' has been observed in Armenia, Moldova, and Georgia at times. It creates moral hazard and undermines the leverage of democracy-supporting actors.

Credibility and Consistency of Western Conditionality

The effectiveness of EU and US support is constrained by inconsistencies in policy implementation and enforcement. Delays in disbursing aid, tolerance of democratic backsliding for geopolitical reasons, and fragmented messaging have diminished the credibility of Western conditionality.

For instance, in Georgia, the EU has been criticised for muted responses to democratic regression under the ruling party, which sends mixed signals to reformers. In Ukraine, despite extensive support, progress has been uneven, and Western actors have sometimes prioritised short-term stability over long-term reform. This raises doubts about the West's staying power and normative commitment.

External Shocks and Democratic Resilience

Ongoing conflicts (Ukraine, Georgia), global economic shocks, and the pandemic have strained governance in the EN and exposed weaknesses in democratic institutions. External actors must often balance reform promotion with humanitarian and security priorities. These competing imperatives can dilute democratisation efforts and shift focus to state resilience over civic empowerment. Moreover, societies under stress are more susceptible to populist narratives, conspiracy theories, and authoritarian appeals. The increasing digitalisation of politics—often dominated by malign foreign influence—further undermines informed citizen engagement and trust in democratic processes (Feldstein 2019).

Dilemma of Engagement with Non-Democratic Actors

China's rising role poses a normative dilemma for Western actors. While Beijing does not explicitly challenge democracy, its practices promote state-centric, elite-driven governance. Engagement with China may inadvertently strengthen illiberal development paths. Similarly, engaging Russia-aligned elites (e.g., in Moldova, Belarus, or, recently, Georgia) risks legitimising autocracy, while excluding them may reduce influence altogether. Democracy promoters must navigate between principled isolation and pragmatic inclusion, often with uncertain outcomes. These challenges require a recalibration of democracy support strategies. External actors should better align normative goals with strategic interests, increase the coherence of their conditionality, and bolster democratic resilience in the face of systemic threats.

6 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations: How to Improve and Adjust EU Democracy Support to the Geopolitical Environment?

Geopolitical competition in the EN region is here to stay, and the EU must partake in this competition. The political evolution of the EU's EN has been shaped by the interplay of competing geopolitical strategies. The European Union and the United States have promoted a vision of democratic governance rooted in liberal norms, transparency, and institutional accountability. By contrast, Russia has obstructed democratisation by fostering dependency, backing autocratic elites, and undermining sovereign agency. China, while more pragmatic and less intrusive, has advanced a model of development devoid of democratic conditionality, offering infrastructural and financial partnerships that can enable elite entrenchment.

The comparative analysis reveals that **Western actors have had a meaningful—though not uniform—impact on democratic development**, especially in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Where reformist coalitions have existed domestically, EU and US support has facilitated judicial reform, civil society development, and electoral competitiveness. Yet these achievements are fragile and often reversed when domestic elites consolidate control or when external shocks, such as war, pandemic, or economic crises, redirect state priorities.

Russia's role has been largely destabilising, strategically reinforcing hybrid and authoritarian regimes, leveraging separatist conflicts, and weaponising energy and information. Its normative counter-narrative—anchored in sovereignty and 'multi-polar world'—directly undermines the liberal order. **China's influence is more subtle** but increasingly important, especially in digital governance and infrastructure. It does not contest democracy directly but provides authoritarian-leaning regimes with tools that may weaken transparency and civic participation.

In this geopolitical context, the EU has been pushed towards a more interest-oriented, as opposed to a value-oriented approach, paying more attention to security considerations and reassessing the value-based strategy. It is crucial for the EU to prioritise reconciling its security interests and democracy support. Conflicts between value-based foreign policy, including democracy promotion, and security interests have been widely discussed in academic literature. However, our research on the EN region suggests that in this specific geopolitical environment, **European security interests and democracy support are overall not conflicting**. On the contrary, the interdependence between security and democracy goes in both directions. On the one hand, for the EU to be able to protect its own security and European security at large, it needs to support the development of democracy in the EN countries and constrain the spread of autocracy, since the main source of threat to Europe is Russia and its allies. On the other hand, the success of EU democracy support depends on the EU's ability to strengthen the security and sovereignty of the EN countries and help them counter geopolitical pressure from autocratic powers, notably Russia and, to a lesser extent, China.

Hence, **democracy support and democratic conditionality need to be part of the EU's response to geopolitical conflicts in the region**. The case of Ukraine shows most clearly that, for democracy to be consolidated, the country needs support to counter the Russian aggression and maintain its sovereignty. The EU's geopolitical interests and value-based agenda are aligned, as long as Ukraine is committed to European orientation and pursues European values (in spite of obvious shortcomings in the quality of Ukraine's democracy, which are often exacerbated by the ongoing war). The case of Georgia, by contrast, is a clear example of a failed attempt by the EU to pursue geopolitical interests at the cost of values. The EU tried to

keep the country on a European and Western track and closed its eyes to authoritarian tendencies, failing to recognise that it was the growing authoritarianism that made the government increasingly vulnerable to Russian influence and eventually turned it against the EU, although supporting the goal of EU membership in rhetoric.

Three aspects of the impact of geopolitical rivalry on democracy in the EN require particular attention and need to be addressed by the EU.

- First, **serious threats to security are an obvious impediment to the strengthening and consolidation of democracy in several EN countries.** As Russia has become increasingly aggressive towards its neighbours, the EU's weakness in the realm of hard security has become a limitation to its ability to support democracy. In the face of Russian military invasion, promotion of separatism, and softer means to erode the sovereignty of the EN countries, the EU has to become a stronger security provider in the region (Gretskiy 2025; Hosaka 2025).
- Second, **economic, political, societal, and other linkages between an authoritarian major power and an EN country make the latter more vulnerable to autocratic influence** (Kneuer et al. 2025). Lack of democracy and rule of law creates more favourable conditions for Russia to enhance its control over the target countries, or for China to advance its geoeconomic interests. Russia has extensively used the energy dependencies of EN countries as a tool of blackmail and political pressure. China has supported authoritarian practices through the spread of digital dual-use surveillance technologies (Bader 2025). Both Russia and China have used corruption and state capture as tools to increase their influence in the region. Therefore, the EU's democracy support should go hand in hand with efforts to reduce unhealthy dependencies of EN countries on authoritarian powers.¹²
- Third, **both Russia and China spread narratives that undermine democracy, which helps them promote their geopolitical ambitions in the EN region.** The Russian narratives are openly confrontational vis-à-vis the West, and contest Western or European values and influence, whereas the Chinese narratives bring into question the Western model in a more subtle manner (Raik et al. 2024a). Russia promotes its narratives through extensive media presence, institutions such as *Russotrudnichestvo* and the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, and local proxies (Gretskiy 2025). China has also increased its media presence and influence through educational institutions, notably the Confucius Institutes hosted by EN universities (Bader 2025). The EU has developed policies and mechanisms to expose and debunk disinformation spread by external powers, but this reactive approach is clearly insufficient.¹³ Therefore, the EU should strengthen a proactive approach to strategic communication that supports a democratic, European orientation of the EN countries and undermines the narratives of authoritarian competitors. It is essential to bridge the knowledge gap about the pertinent EU policies, strategies, and actions (e.g., financial and development aid). Failing to effectively communicate the benefits—which those provide to EN countries that seek closer cooperation with the EU—is easily exploited, in particular, during electoral campaigns (e.g., Moldova).¹⁴ Keeping in mind the pervasiveness of dis- and

¹² It should be noted, however, that the lack of dependencies does not guarantee the development of democracy. Azerbaijan is a case with a high level of independence from the major powers, but also persistent authoritarian rule.

¹³ See, for example, [European Digital Media Observatory – EDMO](#).

¹⁴ See, for example: European Commission, [Joint Declaration following the first EU-Republic of Moldova Summit](#) (Chişinău: European Commission, July 2025); [“Most Moldovans trust and have a positive image of the EU, opinion poll finds,” EU Neighbourhood East](#), November 2024.

misinformation on social media, improvement of digital and media literacy, in cooperation with local stakeholders, has to be integrated into such policies.

To summarise, the findings of this research underscore the **complexity and fragmentation of external influence** in the EN region. They highlight the need for **coordinated, consistent, and principled democracy promotion** by the EU. Conditionality must be credible; engagement should prioritise long-term institution-building; and support must be responsive to domestic agency and local contexts.

Future research could explore the evolving role of **digital tools**, the **resilience of civil society**, and the **feedback loops between domestic reformers and foreign actors for democracy support in the EN**. Understanding how these interactions shape the trajectory of democracy will be critical for ensuring that the region does not remain trapped in liminality but progresses towards accountable and inclusive governance.

Policy Recommendations

In order for EU democracy support to be effective, the EU needs to help EN countries counter the autocratic influence of Russia and China. All EN countries are facing serious security threats that they cannot address on their own. Hence, they will continue to seek opportunities to receive support from major external actors. The EU does have the resources needed to assist them—and doing so would be a valuable investment in the EU's own strategic security, as well as long-term stability and prosperity in Europe.

Therefore, the EU needs to become a stronger security provider vis-à-vis the Russian threat; strengthen its strategic communication; and help EN countries minimise risks that emerge from China's growing economic involvement. The EU can utilise the plethora of already existing tools, mechanisms, and frameworks to their full potential, while constantly adapting and adjusting them to the changing geopolitical environment and the entailing challenges when and where necessary.

Accordingly, we recommend that the EU adopt a geopolitically resilient approach to its democracy support in the EN and, more specifically:

- **Complement EU democracy assistance with robust support for security, sovereignty, and societal resilience.**
- In those EN countries that are interested in closer ties with the EU, reinforce support to democracy by **boosting defence capabilities and hard security infrastructure** that enables them to counter the Russian military threat.
- **Build capacity against hybrid threats**, such as cyber-attacks, disinformation, election interference, and energy blackmail. These are the main tools Russia uses to destabilise reformist governments.
- **Assist EN countries in reducing economic and energy dependencies**, especially in critical infrastructure, on authoritarian powers that use these dependencies as instruments of pressure and coercion.
- Increase **investment in cyber defence, digital infrastructure security, and counter-surveillance technologies in EaP** countries, as Russia and China increasingly deploy digital tools for

their own interests. EU democracy support in this sphere should also include targeted programmes on digital rights, data protection, and safeguarding democratic oversight of new technologies.

- **Strengthen the security-democracy nexus** by linking security aid explicitly to democratic reforms, so that it does not come at the expense of democratic conditionality; condition bilateral military and police cooperation on basic human rights and transparency standards to avoid reinforcing hybrid regimes. In autocracy-leaning EN countries, the EU should maintain efficient **safeguards to prevent its democracy support from being misused for further autocratic consolidation**.
- **Reduce the attractiveness of closer ties with authoritarian major powers** for EN countries by ensuring the credibility of the EU accession process. To this end, **recalibrate conditionality** by combining strict benchmarks in areas such as judiciary reform, anti-corruption, and media freedom with phased rewards, thereby reducing the risk of disillusionment in candidate countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.
- **Seek innovative ways to invest in societal resilience**, amid restrictive policies towards civil society in several EN states, and expand support for independent media, watchdog NGOs, youth exchanges, and Erasmus+ mobility—particularly in hybrid regimes—recognising that civil society remains a key driver of democratic resilience even under adverse geopolitical and domestic conditions.
- **Counter authoritarian narratives by scaling up strategic communication** capacities in local languages to counter Russian disinformation and delegitimisation campaigns and reinforce or regain ownership of the local information space.

At the same time, the EN governments should:

- **Develop resilience against external coercion** by reducing vulnerabilities to Russian leverage through diversification of energy supplies, transport, and trade routes and by deepening alignment with EU standards (ENTSO-E, TEN-T, gas interconnectors and storage, etc.).
- **Resist authoritarian temptations** and avoid overreliance on China's unconditional financing and surveillance technologies, which may entrench elite dominance at the expense of accountability.
- **Extend and streamline cooperation with civil society and other local stakeholders** (socially responsible businesses, investigative journalists, grassroots initiatives—demos) to be better prepared, equipped, and able to respond to challenges, spanning from political crises and stalled reforms to hybrid and conventional security threats by building trust and networks.
- **Support the local civil society organisations**, helping them weather the hard times of uncertain international funding (USAID) and keep them and their vital projects (oversight and watchdog, healthcare, education, sustainability of rural communities, etc.) afloat while respecting their independence.
- **Cultivate and leverage the soft power, advocacy, and economic potential of diasporas**, including the students; expend efforts aimed at keeping the youth studying abroad connected and engaged in national affairs, and incentivise their return. Likewise, encourage inbound academic mobility to nurture people-to-people connections, which will simultaneously improve the quality of education domestically. In combination, those efforts will serve as a substantial investment in social and human capital—and the demos.

REFERENCES

Akhvlediani, Tinatin. 2019. *Digital and Cyber Dimensions of the EU Association Agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine*. CEPS/3DCFTAs Policy Paper. Brussels: European Council on Foreign Relations. 12 December 2019.

<https://3dcftas.eu/publications/digital-and-cyber-dimensions-of-the-eu-association-agreements-with-georgia-moldova-and-ukraine>.

Aleksanyan, A., Serobyan, A., Chappell, L., Exadaktylos, T., Gevorgyan, K., Richter, M. M. 2024. EU and EU Member States' Democracy Support Actions (2010-2022). REDEMOS Dataset 2.5. [Data set]. Zenodo.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13145726>.

Allakhadiyev, Emil, Tofig Mustafayev. 2023. “Торгово-экономическое сотрудничество ЕС и постсоветских государств в контексте программы «Восточное партнёрство»: на примере Азербайджана и Грузии [Trade and economic cooperation between the EU and post-Soviet states in the context of the Eastern Partnership programme: the case of Azerbaijan and Georgia].” *Теоретическая и прикладная экономика* [Theoretical and Applied Economics] 2: 1-10.

<https://doi.org/10.25136/2409-8647.2023.2.4364>.

Ambrosio, Thomas. 2009. *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315583230>.

Antonyan, Davit. 2024. “Armenia’s Foreign Policy Diversification Amid New Geopolitical Realities.” APRI Institute, 30 April 2024.

<https://apri.institute/armenias-foreign-policy-diversification-amid-new-geopolitical-realities/>.

ARKA. 2025. “Bill on Beginning Armenia’s Accession to EU Signed into Law by Armenian President.” *ARKA News Agency* (Yerevan), 4 April 2025.

<https://arka.am/en/news/politics/bill-on-beginning-armenia-s-accession-to-eu-signed-into-law-by-armenian-president/>.

Bader, Julia. 2025. “The role of China in the political transition of the EU’s eastern neighbourhood.” Zenodo.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14725196>.

Blocher, John W. 2021 “Unexpected Competition: A U.S. Strategy to Keep Its Central and Eastern European Allies as Allies in an Era of Great Power Competition.” *Atlantic Council*, May 2021.

https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/unexpected-competition/?utm_source.

Blockmans, Steven. 2022. “The EU’s Geopolitical Birth.” *European Foreign Affairs Review* 27 (3): 155-60.

Buscaneanu, Sergiu. 2024. “Putin, the Near Abroad, Leverage and Linkage.” Zenodo.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14331084>.

Carothers, Thomas, Oren Feldmann. 2022. “The Future of Democracy Support in a Changing World.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/09/28/future-of-democracy-support-in-changing-world-pub-88096>.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/geui20/45/3>.

Caucasus Research Resource Center. 2024. “Caucasus Barometer 2024 Georgia.” CRRC, May 2024.
<https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/codebook/> .

Delcour, Laure. 2015. “The EU and Russia in their ‘Contested Neighbourhood’: Multiple External Influences, Policy Transfer and Domestic Change.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 67(2): 325–328.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1013049> .

Delcour, Laure. 2023. “The EU’s Eastern Partnership at a Crossroads: Normative Power and Geopolitical Constraints.” *European Foreign Affairs Review* 28(1): 23–38.
<https://kluwerlawonline.com/journalarticle/European+Foreign+Affairs+Review/28.1/EERR2023002> .

Della Sala, Vincent. 2023. “Ontological Security, Crisis and Political Myth: The Ukraine War and the European Union.” *Journal of European Integration* 45 (3): 361-75.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/geui20/45/3>.

Emerson, Michael, Tamara Kovziridze. 2022. *Deepening EU–Georgia Relations: What, Why and How?* CEPS/Rowman & Littlefield.
<https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/deepening-eu-georgia-relations/> .

EU Neighbourhood East. 2024. “Most Moldovans trust and have a positive image of the EU, opinion poll finds.” November 2024.
<https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/opinion-polls/most-moldovans-trust-and-have-a-positive-image-of-the-eu-opinion-poll-finds>.

European Commission. 2004. *Communication from the Commission, European Neighbourhood Policy. Brussels, COM (2004) 373 final*.
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=celex%3A52004DC0373>

European Commission. 2022. *Statement by Commissioner for Energy Kadri Simson on Synchronisation of the Continental European Electricity Grid with Ukraine and Moldova*. Brussels: European Commission. March 2022.
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_22_1789.

European Commission. 2024. *Quarterly Report on European Gas Markets: Q4 2024*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
https://energy.ec.europa.eu/document/download/4aebee79-01e9-4a06-927e-8dd42fc4f9a8_en?filename=New%20Quarterly%20Report%20on%20European%20gas%20markets%20Q4%202024.pdf.

European Commission. 2025. “European Digital Media Observatory – EDMO.” Last update 31 July 2025.
<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/european-digital-media-observatory> .

European Commission. 2025a. *EU Military Support to Ukraine*. Brussels: European Commission. Last updated June 2025.

https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-solidarity-ukraine/eu-assistance-ukraine/eu-military-support-ukraine_en.

European Commission. 2025b. “EU-Neighbourhood East cooperation through Erasmus+: Opportunities for the Neighbourhood East (NE).”

<https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/9057e410-6c71-45d9-a286-6abb35537664/library/b18aa6b5-1796-4a0d-800a-83c65cbcd29/details>.

European Commission. 2025c. *Joint Declaration following the first EU-Republic of Moldova Summit*. Chişinău: European Commission. July 2025.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_1740.

European Council, Council of the European Union. “Eastern Partnership. Explainers.” last modified in February 2025.

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/>.

European External Action Service. 2016. *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy*. Brussels: EEAS. June 2016.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf.

European External Action Service. 2025. “About the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA).” Brussels: EEAS. July 2025.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/about-european-union-mission-armenia_en?s=410283.

European Parliament. 2022. *Report on Security in the Eastern Partnership Area and the Role of Common Security and Defence Policy*. European Parliament Report A9-0168/2022. Brussels: European Parliament. May 2022.

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0168_EN.html.

European Union. 1999a. *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, and the Republic of Armenia*. CELEX: 21999A0909(01). Official Journal of the European Communities, L 239, September 1999.

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A21999A0909%2801%29>.

European Union. 1999b. *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, and the Republic of Azerbaijan*. CELEX: 01999A0917(01)-20091101. Official Journal of the European Communities, L 246, September 1999.

[EUR-Lex - 01999A0917\(01\)-20091101 - EN - EUR-Lex](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A01999A0917(01)-20091101).

European Union. 2014a. *Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the other part*. Official Journal of the European Union L 260, August 2014.

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A22014A0830%2801%29>.

European Union. 2014b. *Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part*. Official Journal of the European Union L 261, August 2014.

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A22014A0830%2802%29>.

European Union. 2014c. *Association Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and Ukraine, of the other part*. Official Journal of the European Union L 161, May 29, 2014. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A22014A0529%2801%29>.

European Union. 2018. *Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Armenia, of the other part*. Official Journal of the European Union, L 23: (26 January 2018). CELEX 22018A0126(01). [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22018A0126\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22018A0126(01)).

Eurostat. 2025a. “First permits by reason, length of validity and citizenship.” https://doi.org/10.2908/MIGR_RESFIRST.

Eurostat. 2025b. “Temporary protection for persons fleeing Ukraine - monthly statistics.” Last updated 4 July 2025. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary_protection_for_persons_fleeing_Ukraine_-_monthly_statistics.

Eurostat. 2025c. “Economic developments in European Neighbourhood East countries.” Statistics Explained article, updated January 2025. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Economic_developments_in_European_Neighbourhood_East_countries.

Exadaktylos, Theofanis, Michael Martin Richter, Arusyak Aleksanyan, Ashot Aleksanyan, Laura Chappell, Danyl Denysenko, Valentina Gevorgyan, Vanatur Sherents. 2024. “Taking Stock of EU Member States Democracy Action towards the Eastern Neighbourhood.” Zenodo, December 2024. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15011612>

Feldstein, Steven. 2019. *The Global Expansion of AI Surveillance*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/09/17/global-expansion-of-ai-surveillance-pub-79847> .

Finkel, Steven E., Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, Mitchell A. Seligson. 2007. “The Effects of U.S. Foreign Assistance on Democracy Building, 1990–2003.” *World Politics* 59(3): 404–439. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100020876>.

Freedom House. 2023. *Nations in Transit 2023: Russia*. Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2023. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/nations-transit/2023>.

Freyburg, Madalina Dobrescu, Anastasiia Vlasenko. 2024. Conceptual framework EU democracy funding: Unpacking EU democracy assistance. What model of democracy does EU funding suit? Zenodo, March 2024. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13310202>.

Gallup. 2023. “Empire's Twilight? Russia Loses Support in Its Own Backyard.” Gallup, May 2023. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/505793/empire-twilight-russia-loses-support-own-backyard.aspx>.

Gogolashvili, Kakha, Ekaterine Metreveli. 2025. “The Role of the United States in the Political Transition in the EU’s Eastern Neighborhood.” Zenodo.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17341441>.

Governance Monitoring Center, J. Dowsett. 2025. “Georgia’s Surveillance Surge: Chinese Cameras Spark Protest Crackdown Fears,” OCCRP, 29 March 2025

<https://www.occrp.org/en/news/georgias-surveillance-surge-chinese-cameras-spark-protest-crackdown-fears>.

Gressel, Gustav. 2020. *Promoting European Strategic Sovereignty in the Eastern Neighbourhood*. ECFR Policy Brief. London and Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations. December 2020.

<https://ecfr.eu/publication/promoting-european-strategic-sovereignty-in-the-eastern-neighbourhood/>.

Gretskiy, Igor. 2025. “The role of Russia in the political transition of the EU’s eastern neighbourhood.” Zenodo.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14725066>.

Grodzicki, Tomasz. 2022. “Trade Flows Between the European Union and the Eastern Partnership Countries: Dynamics and Prospects.” *Nowa Polityka Wschodnia* 4(35): 145–160.

<https://doi.org/10.15804/npw20223507>.

Guliyev, Vusal. 2023. “China’s Soft Power Diplomacy in the South Caucasus.” Baku Research Institute.

<https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/chinas-soft-power-diplomacy-in-the-south-caucasus>.

Gvazdabia, M. 2025. “Georgian Dream is watching: how AI-powered surveillance is used against Tbilisi protesters.” OC Media, 29 May 2025

<https://oc-media.org/georgian-dream-is-watching-how-ai-powered-surveillance-is-used-against-tbilisi-protesters/>.

Hosaka, Sanshiro. 2025, *Russia’s Influence in the South Caucasus and EU Policy Options*. International Centre for Defence and Security.

<https://icds.ee/en/russias-influence-in-the-south-caucasus-and-eu-policy-options/> .

Human Rights Watch. 2025. “Ukraine: New Law Undercuts Independence of Anti-Corruption Bodies.” July 2025.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/07/24/ukraine-new-law-undercuts-independence-of-anti-corruption-bodies>.

Institute of International Education. 2024a. “Country Fact Sheets.”

https://opendoorsdata.org/fact_sheets/student-mobility.

Institute of International Education. 2024b. All Destinations.

<https://opendoorsdata.org/data/us-study-abroad/all-destinations>.

International Republican Institute. 2025. “National Survey of Moldova.” IRI, May 2025.

<https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-moldova-may-2025/>.

Jakóbowski, Jakub, Kamil Kłysiński. 2021. "The Non-Strategic Partnership: Belarus-China Relations." Centre for Eastern Studies.

https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW-Studies_The-non-strategic-partnership_net-1.pdf

Jayanti, Suriya Evans-Pritchard. 2025. "Moldova Is the Real Loser from the End of Russian Gas Transit through Ukraine." *Atlantic Council*, January 2025.

https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/moldova-is-the-real-loser-from-the-end-of-russian-gas-transit-through-ukraine/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Kamalov, Emil, Karolina Nugumanova, Ivetta Sergeeva. 2025. "On the Move: Mobility, Integration, and Dynamics of Russian Emigration in 2022-2024." SSRN.

<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5204018>. https://sieps.se/media/vevemnyh/the-eu-and-belarus_-seizing-the-opportunity_-2016_13epa.pdf

Kneuer, Marianne, Sergiu Buscaneanu, Marco Christian Parluhutan. 2025. 'External actors and their autocratic influence in the European Neighbourhood: the cases of Russia and China.' Zenodo.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15315775>.

Korosteleva, Elena A. 2026. "The EU and Belarus: seizing the opportunity?" *Sieps Issue 2016:13epa*. November 2016.

https://sieps.se/media/vevemnyh/the-eu-and-belarus_-seizing-the-opportunity_-2016_13epa.pdf.

Kundnani, Hans. 2023. Europe's Geopolitical Confusion. *Internationale Politik Quarterly*.

<https://ip-quarterly.com/en/europes-geopolitical-confusion>.

Lazarou, Eleni, Panagiotis Politis Lamprou. 2025. *The EU's New Bilateral Security and Defence Partnerships*. EPRS Briefing 24-01-2025. Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service. January 2025.

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/767215/EPRS_BRI\(2025\)767215_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/767215/EPRS_BRI(2025)767215_EN.pdf).

Manners, Ian, 2002. Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?. *Journal of Common Market Studies Vol 40 Issue 2*. December 2002. 235-258.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353>.

Mechkova, Valeriya, Anna Lührmann, Staffan I. Lindberg. 2020. *Autocratization Surges—Resistance Grows: Democracy Report 2020*. Varieties of Democracy Institute.

https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2020.pdf.

Migration Policy Institute. 2024. "Top Diaspora Groups in the United States, 2023."

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/top-diaspora-groups-united-states-2023>.

Miković, Nikola. 2025. *Opinion: Spurned by the West, Russia ally Belarus is courting China*. South China Morning Post, January 2025.

https://www.scmp.com/opinion/world-opinion/article/3276203/how-belarus-seeking-balance-russia-ties-stronger-china-relations?utm_source

Miller, Christopher. 2016. *Why Russia's Economic Leverage Is Declining*. Washington, DC: Transatlantic Academy, April 2016.

https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Miller_RussiasEconomicLeverage_Apr16_web.pdf.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 2016. *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*.

[https://www.russiamatters.org/sites/default/files/media/files/Foreign%20Policy%20Concept%20of%20the%20Russian%20Federation%20\(approved%20by%20President%20of%20the%20Russian%20Federation%20Vladimir%20Putin%20on%20November%2030,%202016\)%20-%20Asset%20Publisher%20-%20The%20Ministry%20of%20Foreign%20Affairs%20of%20the%20Russian%20Federation.pdf](https://www.russiamatters.org/sites/default/files/media/files/Foreign%20Policy%20Concept%20of%20the%20Russian%20Federation%20(approved%20by%20President%20of%20the%20Russian%20Federation%20Vladimir%20Putin%20on%20November%2030,%202016)%20-%20Asset%20Publisher%20-%20The%20Ministry%20of%20Foreign%20Affairs%20of%20the%20Russian%20Federation.pdf) .

OEC (The Observatory of Economic Complexity). 2025. “Country Profile - Georgia.”

<https://oec.world/en/profile/country/geo?yearSelector1=2021&flowSelector1=flow1&yearlyTradeFlowSelector=flow0>.

OECD. 2024. “CRS: Creditor Reporting System (flows).”

<https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1>.

Petersen, Svenja. 2025. “From Cracks to Fractions in the Alliance: Armenia and Russia Drift Further Apart.” *Caucasus Watch*, January 2025.

<https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/from-cracks-to-fractions-in-the-alliance-armenia-and-russia-drift-further-apart.html>.

President of Russia. 2008. *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*. The Kremlin. 12 January 2008.

<http://www.en.special.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116>

Rabinovych, Maryna, Stiven Kimmel. 2025. “Trends, patterns and coordination in the EU, Member States' and international institutions' assistance to the eastern neighbourhood countries.” Zenodo.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14794746>.

Raik, Kristi, Igor Gretskiy, Tetiana Fedosyuk. 2024a. “Narratives of external norm contenders across the EU's eastern neighbourhood.” Zenodo.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14230519>.

Raik, Kristi, Steven Blockmans, Anna Osypchuk, Anton Suslov. 2024b. “EU Policy towards Ukraine: Entering Geopolitical Competition over European Order,” *The International Spectator* 59:1 (2024): 39-58.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03932729.2023.2296576>.

Rosstat. 2022. “Итоги Всероссийской переписи населения 2020 года. Том 5. Национальный состав и владение языками.” [Results of the 2020 All-Russian Population Census. Volume 5. National composition and language proficiency]. Rosstat 2022.

https://web.archive.org/web/20221230204643/https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/Tom5_tab1_VPN-2020.xlsx.

Royal United Services Institute, *Russia's Evolving Approach to the South Caucasus*, RUSI report, 2024.

<https://static.rusi.org/retying-the-caucasian-knot-russias-evolving-approach-to-the-south-caucasus.pdf>.

Rudkouski, Piotr. “Russia's cultural leverage in Belarus.” *New Perspectives* 29:1 (2021): 102–108.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X20984331>.

State Council of the People's Republic of China. 2023. *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*. Beijing: State Council of the PRC. September 2023.

https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202309/26/content_WS6512703dc6d0868f4e8dfc37.html.

Sukhov, Oleg. 2025. "The crackdown on Ukraine's anti-corruption agencies, explained." *The Kyiv Independent*. 21 July 2025.

<https://kyivindependent.com/ukrainian-authorities-crack-down-on-anti-corruption-agencies-as-their-independence-is-in-jeopardy/>.

Tocci, Nathalie. 2017. *Framing the EU Global Strategy: A Stronger Europe in a Fragile World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tolstrup, Jakob. 2014. *Russia vs. the EU: The Competition for Influence in Post-Soviet States*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2014.

https://www.rienner.com/title/Russia_vs_the_EU_The_Competition_for_Influence_in_Post_Soviet_States.

United States Census Bureau. 2024. "U. S. Foreign-Born Population: 2019-2023."

<https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/foreign-born-population-2019-2023.html/>.

Walker, Christopher, Jessica Ludwig. 2017. "The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence." National Endowment for Democracy.

<https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/The-Meaning-of-Sharp-Power-Authoritarian-Influence-in-the-21st-Century.pdf>.

Way, Lucan A. 2015. *Pluralism by Default: Weak Autocrats and the Rise of Competitive Politics*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/40146>.

Weilandt, Ragnar. 2025a. "The EU and Georgia: Between a rock and a hard place." Zenodo.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14967680>.

Weilandt, Ragnar. 2025b. "Interplay of security & stability and democracy support." Zenodo.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14794564>.

The White House. 2015. *National Security Strategy*. Washington, DC: The White House. February 2015.

<https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2015.pdf>.

The White House. 2017. *National Security Strategy*. Washington, DC: The White House. December 2017.

<https://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-2017/>.

The White House. 2022. *National Security Strategy*. Washington, DC: The White House. October 2022.

<https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

Zeng, Jinghan. 2021. "Rethinking China's Rise: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia." *International Affairs* 97(3): 623–641.


<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab042>.



**REDEMOS: REconfiguring EU DEMOcracy Support.
Towards a sustained demos in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood**

REDEMOS- 101061738
HORIZON-CL2-2021-DEMOCRACY-01-04

Dr Mădălina Dobrescu, NTNU
info@redemos.eu

 redemos.eu  [@REDEMOS_eu](https://twitter.com/REDEMOS_eu)  [REDEMOS Horizon Europe Project](https://www.linkedin.com/company/redemos/)