



# REDEMOS

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

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# Evaluating the impact of domestic political factors on EU democracy support

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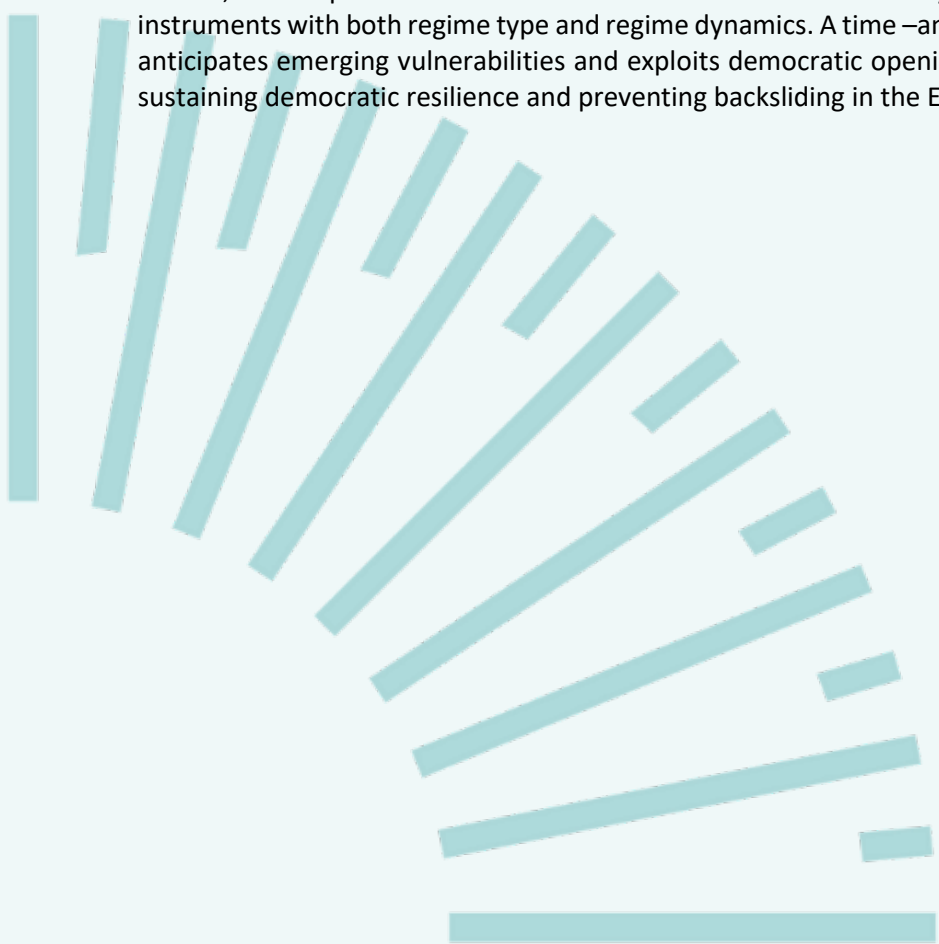
## Executive Summary

This report evaluates how domestic political factors – i.e. in support-receiving countries – shape democracy support priorities in the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood. Building on the regime states framework developed in REDEMOS WP5, and focusing on the period 1990–2023, it adopts a dynamic understanding of political regimes that captures not only regime type but also recent trajectories of stability, deterioration, or improvement. By focusing on the most recent regime states experienced by Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Belarus, the report identifies context-specific democratic vulnerabilities and opportunities that are directly relevant for the design of democracy support strategies.

Across the Eastern Neighbourhood, five categories of domestic factors emerge as particularly important for democracy support priorities: *judicial independence and accountability*; *electoral integrity*; *the media and information environment*; *executive power and oversight*; and *civil society and association rights*. While the salience of these factors varies across regime states, weaknesses in judicial independence and accountability appear as a cross-cutting constraint on democratic consolidation in all six countries. Electoral integrity and media pluralism are especially decisive in contexts characterised by electoral democracy downturns or instability, while executive dominance and restrictions on civil society are most pronounced in persistently autocratic settings.

The findings underscore that democracy support cannot rely on uniform templates. In countries experiencing democratic downturns or early signs of regression, such as Armenia and Georgia, targeted support for electoral integrity, judicial independence, media freedom, and civil society protection is essential to prevent further erosion. In Moldova and Ukraine, where recent improvements coexist with structural vulnerabilities, democracy support should prioritise consolidating gains through institutional safeguards and oversight mechanisms. In entrenched autocracies such as Azerbaijan and Belarus, opportunities for engagement are more limited, requiring long-term, indirect strategies focused on civil society, accountability norms, and external pressure.

Overall, the report demonstrates that effective EU democracy support depends on aligning policy instruments with both regime type and regime dynamics. A time –and country-sensitive approach – one that anticipates emerging vulnerabilities and exploits democratic openings early – offers the best prospects for sustaining democratic resilience and preventing backsliding in the Eastern Neighbourhood.



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## List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

<b>ARMA</b>	Asset Recovery and Management Agency
<b>CA</b>	Closed Autocracy
<b>CCU</b>	The Constitutional Court of Ukraine
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organisations
<b>CSOSI</b>	Civil Society Organisation Sustainability Index
<b>EA</b>	Electoral Autocracy
<b>ED</b>	Electoral Democracy
<b>EN</b>	Eastern Neighbourhood
<b>EDI</b>	Electoral Democracy Index

<b>EMB</b>	Electoral Management Body
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>LD</b>	Liberal Democracy
<b>LDI</b>	Liberal Democracy Index
<b>RFE/RL</b>	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
<b>NABU</b>	National Bureau of Investigation
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>OSCE</b>	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
<b>ODIHR</b>	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
<b>SAPO</b>	Specialised Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office
<b>V-Dem</b>	Varieties of Democracy (research project and dataset)

# 1 Introduction

Democracy support is a complex and multidimensional endeavour, shaped by a wide range of context-contingent factors (Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2018; Lean, 2007). When focusing specifically on domestic political factors – within the target country – these are largely shaped by regime characteristics. Yet regimes are not static; they evolve over time. Most existing classifications establish categories and thresholds that delineate one regime state from another (Riedl et al., 2024; Lührmann et al., 2018). However, they place less emphasis on the ways regimes fluctuate around these identified categories. This dynamism is especially relevant for democracy support, as programmes and initiatives must remain attuned to emerging vulnerabilities and ready to seize political openings at an early stage.

REDEMOS WP5 contributes to addressing this challenge in pursuit of more effective democracy support in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. Buşçaneanu & Kneuer (2024) introduce a new dynamic framework for identifying regime states, combining regime classifications with democratisation and autocratisation trends. Karokis-Mavrikos et al. (2025) and Nasibov & Kneuer (2025) then provide an in-depth analysis of the most recent regime states in each Eastern Neighbourhood country, combining macro-level indicator assessments with domestic expert input to identify the factors driving emerging trajectories.

This report aggregates the findings of WP5 by identifying five categories of domestic factors that primarily drive democratic vulnerabilities in the Eastern Neighbourhood – *judicial independence and accountability; electoral integrity; the media and information environment; executive power and oversight; and civil society and association rights*.

The report is structured as follows. First, it outlines the relationship between regime states and the domestic factors that shape democracy support priorities. It then examines the five categories of domestic factors most prominent in the Eastern Neighbourhood region, drawing on case studies from the six Eastern Neighbourhood countries. The conclusions reflect on the importance of a time- and country-sensitive approach to effective democracy support in the region – one that is responsive to contemporary regime vulnerabilities in both more advanced democracies and countries characterised by more entrenched autocratic systems<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the report, regime categories refer to the classification of political systems as Closed Autocracies (CA), Electoral Autocracies (EA), Electoral Democracies (ED), or Liberal Democracies (LD). Regime trajectories refer to trends in regime classification over time. Regime states denote manifestations of political regimes along the autocracy–democracy continuum, capturing both static conditions and dynamic changes within or between categories over a connected period of time (i.e., categories + trajectories).

## 2 Regime States and Domestic Factors

Aiming to advance a more dynamic understanding of regimes and their relevance for democracy support, REDEMOS WP5 introduces the regime states framework (Buşcaneanu & Kneuer, 2024). This approach builds on and extends the work of Lührmann et al. (2018) and Riedl et al. (2024).

First, drawing on Lührmann et al. (2018), the regime states framework proposes that countries can be classified into four regime categories: *Closed Autocracy* (CA), *Electoral Autocracy* (EA), *Electoral Democracy*, and *Liberal Democracy*. Closed autocracies represent polities where power is highly centralised, and no meaningful elections take place. Electoral autocracies conduct elections, but they are heavily manipulated to maintain the ruling elites in power. Electoral democracies hold competitive elections, yet their democratic institutions remain vulnerable to internal weaknesses or external pressure. Liberal democracies function with strong protections for civil liberties, the rule of law, and institutional checks and balances.

Second, the regime states framework draws on Riedl et al. (2024) to define the measurement criteria for classifying countries into the four regime categories. Using data from Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), it relies on the global mean values of the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) for 1990-2023 and sets the cut-off points at 0.122 between CA and EA, 0.391 between EA and ED, and 0.80 between ED and LD (Buşcaneanu & Kneuer, 2024)<sup>2</sup>.

Building on these foundations, the regime states framework advances existing scholarship by explicitly assuming that political regimes occupy positions along an autocracy-democracy continuum, ranging from full autocracy to full democracy. Countries seldom shift overnight from dictatorship to democracy or vice versa; instead, they typically move incrementally along this spectrum. This conceptualisation enables the framework to capture gradual political change rather than limiting analysis to abrupt transitions between regime categories.

Accordingly, three types of regime states are identified: (1) *autocratic stasis or democratic stability*; (2) *downturns or upturns* within a given regime category; and (3) *regressions or progressions* across different regime categories. Regime states are defined as distinct manifestations of political regimes along the autocracy-democracy continuum, capturing both static conditions and dynamic changes within or between categories over a connected period of time.

Autocratic stasis and democratic stability describe contexts in which no meaningful regime change occurs over a period of  $n > 1$  years. In autocratic settings, *stasis* reflects the persistence of repressive and exclusionary governance, whereas in democratic contexts, *stability* – carrying a more positive connotation – is associated with strengthened institutional resilience and political inclusion (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Downturns and upturns within a given regime category refer to changes in regime quality that do not amount to a full regime transition. Downturns are marked by declines in regime quality, such as increased media restrictions, weakened institutional independence, or fraudulent elections, while upturns encompass improvements such as strengthened judicial independence or expanded political freedoms. Although these changes do not move a country into a different regime category, they signal whether a country is becoming vulnerable to further deterioration or, conversely, is positioned for democratic advancement.

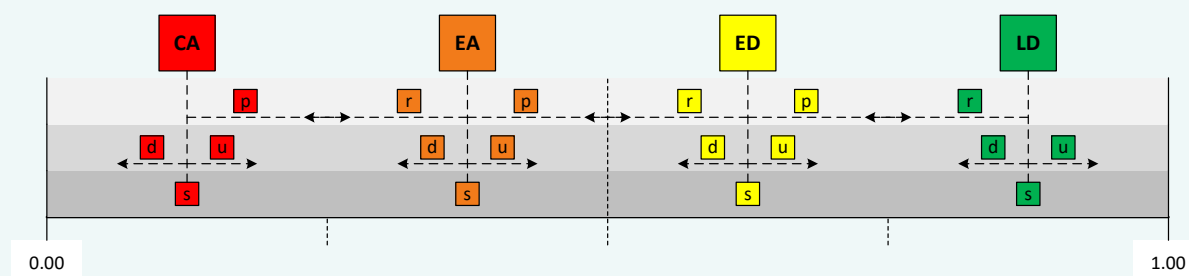
Finally, regressions or progressions across different regime categories involve transitions from one regime category to another, signalling not only a fundamental shift in regime quality but also a change in the regime type. These shifts indicate regime change in *kind* rather than regime change in *degree* (Sartori 1970). A

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that these thresholds are analytical conventions, and their substance depends on their use and interpretation.

transition from electoral autocracy to electoral democracy marks an autocratic breakdown, whereas a shift from electoral democracy to electoral autocracy represents a democratic breakdown.

The regime states framework (Buşcaneanu & Kneuer, 2024) is summarised in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Regime States**

Notes: CA – closed autocracy, EA – electoral autocracy, ED – electoral democracy, LD – liberal democracy; s – stasis/ stability; d – downturn, u – upturn; r – regression, p – progression. Dashed vertical lines delineating regime categories imply that corresponding thresholds can vary depending on definitions, concepts, and the type of data used.

Furthermore, Table 1 presents an overview of the regime states for the six Eastern Neighbourhood countries over the period 1990-2023.

Table 1: Regime States in the Eastern Neighbourhood Countries		
Country	Years	Regime state
Armenia	1992, 1993	EA stasis
	1994, 1995, 1996, 1997	EA downturn
	1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002	EA stasis
	2004, 2005, 2006, 2007	EA stasis
	2013, 2014, 2015, 2016	EA stasis
	2017, 2018, 2019	Progression to ED
	2020, 2021, 2022, 2023	ED downturn
Georgia	1992	Regression to CA
	1993	Progression to EA
	1995, 1996	EA upturn
	1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002	EA stasis
	2003, 2004, 2005	EA upturn
	2006, 2007	EA stasis
	2009, 2010, 2011	EA stasis
	2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016	Progression to ED
2020, 2021, 2022	ED stability	
Moldova	1991, 1992	EA upturn
	1994	Progression to ED
	1995, 1996, 1997	ED stability
	1998, 1999	ED upturn
	2000, 2001	Regression to EA
	2003, 2004	EA stasis
	2006, 2007, 2008	EA stasis

	2009, 2010, 2011	Progression to ED
	2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017	ED downturn
	2019, 2020, 2021, 2022	ED upturn
<b>Ukraine</b>	1991, 1992, 1993	EA upturn
	1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000	EA downturn
	2002, 2003	EA upturn
	2005, 2006, 2007	Progression to ED
	2008, 2009	ED stability
	2010	Regression to EA
	2011, 2012, 2013	EA stasis
	2015, 2016	EA upturn
	2017, 2018	EA stasis
2020, 2021	EA stasis	
<b>Azerbaijan</b>	1991, 1992	Progression to EA
	1993, 1994	Regression to CA
	1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023	CA stasis
<b>Belarus</b>	1991, 1992	Progression to ED
	1994, 1995, 1996, 1997	Regression to EA
	1999	Regression to CA
	2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019	CA stasis
	2020, 2021	CA downturn
	2022, 2023	CA stasis

**Table 1: Regime States in the Eastern Neighbourhood Countries**

In the context of identifying vulnerabilities, needs and priorities for democracy support, the regime states framework makes it possible to concentrate on the most recent regime state for each target country, thereby enabling time- and place-sensitive policy takeaways and recommendations. For the Eastern Neighbourhood countries, these most recent states are: ED downturn for Armenia (2020–2023), ED stability for Georgia (2020–2022), ED upturn for Moldova (2019–2022), EA stasis for Ukraine (2020–2021), CA stasis for Azerbaijan (1995–2023), and CA stasis for Belarus (2022–2023) (Karokis-Mavrikos et al., 2025; Nasibov & Kneuer, 2025; Buşcaneanu & Kneuer, 2024). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge year-to-year movements at the end of the study period that fall short of constituting new regime states but nonetheless signal emerging trendlines – namely, the 2022-2023 decline in Georgia and Moldova and the corresponding improvement in Ukraine.

Furthermore, observing day-to-day regime patterns and trends allows for the identification of key factors that may be shaping them, providing insights into the nature of vulnerabilities and opportunities. To this end, the WP5 analysis first calculates the arithmetic mean of each LDI component over the duration of the most recent regime period and highlights the indicators with the lowest average scores for downturns and stasis, as these point to the most persistently weak areas, as well as the indicators showing the largest gains for upturns, which identify areas of sustained improvement. These rankings do not constitute causal explanations; rather, they serve as structured diagnostic signals highlighting where institutional fragility or

progress has been most consistent over the period in question. Finally, with regard to emerging trends in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, the indicators showing the largest changes between 2022 and 2023 are also identified, enabling early detection of potential reversals or accelerations.

In a second step, these quantitative diagnostics are assessed through qualitative expert validation to enable a more precise identification of the domestic factors shaping democratic trends – and, by extension, democracy support priorities. Expert input contextualises the observed indicator movements and highlights key political and social developments that have contributed to deteriorations and improvements (Karokis-Mavrikos et al., 2025; Nasibov & Kneuer, 2025).

In this report, these insights are aggregated to identify the categories of domestic factors shaping democracy support priorities in the Eastern Neighbourhood Region. Table 2 provides an overview of the five categories – *judicial independence and accountability*; *electoral integrity*; *the media and information environment*; *executive power and oversight*; and *civil society and association rights* – as well as of the countries to which they apply, based on the most recent regime states experienced.

Country		Table 2: Domestic Factors Impacting Regime States in the Eastern Neighbourhood				
		Judicial Independence and Accountability	Electoral Integrity	Media & Information Environment	Executive Power and Oversight	Civil Society & Association Rights
Democracy Path	Ukraine	✓			✓	
	Moldova	✓	✓			
	Armenia	✓	✓	✓		
	Georgia	✓	✓	✓		✓
Autocracy Path	Azerbaijan	✓	✓		✓	
	Belarus	✓				✓

**Table 2: Domestic Factors Impacting Regime States in the Eastern Neighbourhood**

The following sections examine the relationship between regime states and domestic factors in greater depth and highlight the implications for democracy support.

### 3 Judicial Independence and Accountability

Domestic factors related to judicial independence and accountability appear to underpin key democratic vulnerabilities across all six Eastern Neighbourhood countries. These include executive compliance with the judiciary (V-Dem v2jucomp), the degree of independence of high and lower courts (V-Dem v2juhcind), and mechanisms for disciplining judicial misconduct (V-Dem v2juacct).

Among the region's democratic frontrunners, such as Ukraine, judicial independence, particularly in constitutional justice, stands out as a key driver of recent downturns. The Constitutional Court of Ukraine (CCU) has long been vulnerable to political influence due to its fragmented appointment mechanism, divided among the President, parliament, and judiciary. This structural weakness was vividly exposed in 2020 when the CCU struck down key anti-corruption provisions. The President's response – declaring the ruling null, seeking to dismiss judges, and attempting to dissolve the Court – surpassed constitutional limits and deepened political confrontation without resolving underlying design flaws.

Subsequent reforms in Ukraine have produced mixed effects. While some efforts aimed at strengthening integrity checks and judicial vetting, others risked further politicisation. The 2023 law weakening the independence of the CCU selection body – contrary to Venice Commission recommendations – illustrates how judicial reform remains contested and vulnerable to executive preferences, even under EU candidate-state scrutiny. Expert assessments emphasized that despite wartime improvements in certain oversight areas, judicial independence remains among the most persistently weak institutional domains, and this vulnerability continues to shape Ukraine's long-term democratic trajectory (Venice Commission, 2022; Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2020).

For countries that experienced democratisation surges but are currently facing renewed democratic challenges, such as Armenia, reforms aimed at enhancing judicial independence – particularly in the lower courts – were introduced in 2018, in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution, but were not fully institutionalised, allowing for further deterioration. Experts highlighted that by 2022, public confidence in the judiciary remained low, largely due to the persistent influence of political actors with anti-democratic tendencies and the stalling of high-profile corruption cases. Moreover, executive influence over the courts has remained high, with the Ministry of Justice intervening in disciplinary proceedings, recruitment, and administrative oversight, while compliance with judicial decisions has also been inconsistent (Freedom House, 2022; World Bank Group, 2023).

Similarly, in Georgia, despite the prolonged period of Electoral Democracy (ED) stability, experts noted that lower court independence remained persistently weak, constraining further democratic consolidation and leaving the system vulnerable to regression. The independence of lower courts has long been a point of concern. Although legal reforms have been introduced to strengthen judicial autonomy, these initiatives have yielded limited results. In practice, the judiciary continues to face sustained pressure from the executive, especially in politically sensitive cases, while enduring shortcomings in the legal framework enable ongoing political interference. As a result, lower courts are increasingly perceived as instruments of government influence rather than as impartial arbiters of the law (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021; Transparency International Georgia, 2021). The decline observed in 2023 and early 2024 underscores a worsening trajectory, further threatening judicial autonomy and increasing Georgia's susceptibility to regime downturns or potential regression.

Finally, in states characterised by persistent authoritarianism, such as Belarus, judicial independence has long been structurally absent, particularly at the lower-court level. Courts operate under direct executive control, with judges appointed, dismissed, and disciplined by the president without effective safeguards, resulting in systemic obedience rather than accountability. Notably, since the contested 2020 elections, the judiciary has been increasingly instrumentalised to suppress dissent, criminalise civic activism, and enforce political repression. Experts highlight that executive dominance over appointments, disciplinary procedures, and court administration has increasingly transformed the judiciary from an arbiter of justice into a core

instrument of regime control, creating growing structural barriers to the effectiveness of democracy-oriented efforts and initiatives (Amnesty International, 2022; Freedom House, 2021; ICJ, 2021).

Ultimately, across the Eastern Neighbourhood region, weaknesses in the justice system are inhibiting democratic progress and undermining the effectiveness of democracy support efforts, as no democratic system can be consolidated without consistently impartial legal scrutiny. EU democracy support should therefore place stronger conditionality on justice-sector reforms – including the vetting of appointments, professional training, and constitutional reform – and prioritise judicial independence during favourable political openings in order to establish durable constraints against potential anti-democratic tendencies in future administrations.

## 4 Electoral Integrity

Domestic factors related to electoral integrity constitute the second most prominent contributors to democratic vulnerabilities in the Eastern Neighbourhood region. These include the extent to which elections are free and fair (V-Dem *v2elrfair*), the degree of intimidation of opposition parties and representatives by ruling parties (V-Dem *v2elintim*), the prevalence of vote-buying (V-Dem *v2elvotbuy*), and the capacity of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) to administer well-run elections (V-Dem *v2elembcap*).

In Azerbaijan, elections have been systematically manipulated since independence – particularly from the early 2000s onward – cementing the dominance of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP). Since 2013, electoral contests have taken place without genuine challengers and have therefore lacked meaningful competition (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2024a, 2024b). The 2016 constitutional referendum further consolidated executive authority by extending the presidential term to seven years and establishing a vice presidency appointed directly by the president, thereby diminishing the role of elections in political succession (Council of Europe, 2016; Geybullayeva, 2016; RFE/RL, 2016). At the same time, the judiciary and electoral commissions have become increasingly subordinated to the executive, with courts routinely ruling in favour of the government and the Election Management Body (EMB) lacking institutional independence. Consequently, elections in Azerbaijan now function largely as a procedural formality, impeding the development of any democratic momentum.

In countries with greater overall democratic progress, vulnerabilities related to electoral integrity have undermined democratic consolidation and enabled backsliding. In Georgia, democracy support efforts during the 2010s successfully disseminated international best practices, improved training, and contributed to structural reforms, enabling the Central Election Commission (CEC) to develop the institutional capacity to organise elections, manage voter registration and vote-counting procedures, and publish results transparently by the early 2020s (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021; EU Delegation to Georgia, 2020). However, despite these functional improvements, political pressure on the CEC leadership and persistent perceptions of bias remained unresolved, resulting in a continued gap between institutional performance and public trust and constituting an ongoing democratic vulnerability (Transparency International Georgia, 2021). The generally strong EMB capacity during this period was associated with relatively low levels of vote-buying, contributing to perceptions of procedural integrity. Nonetheless, the practice was not entirely eliminated. Experts reported a sharp increase in vote-buying during the 2024 elections, marking a troubling reversal toward less democratic practices and reinforcing the declining democracy trend observed in Georgia since 2022.

However, when democracy support infrastructure is well attuned to regime sensitivities, domestic factors related to elections can provide invaluable opportunities for consolidating democratic progress. In the case of Moldova, a key institutional turning point occurred in 2019, when the country abandoned the contested mixed electoral system and reinstated proportional representation, following sustained criticism from domestic civil society and international bodies, including the Venice Commission. This reform sought to curb political manipulation and restore greater representational fairness. Subsequent electoral processes reflected these improvements. Despite the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 presidential election was administered in a professional manner and offered voters a credible choice. Election observers from the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO) assessed the

process as largely transparent and well managed, while flagging ongoing concerns related to negative campaigning and vote-buying (ENEMO, 2021). Similarly, the 2021 parliamentary elections were evaluated by international observers, including the OSCE, as competitive and orderly, though domestic monitors continued to identify structural weaknesses such as limited enforcement of campaign finance regulations and an uneven electoral playing field.

Elections remain foundational to democratic systems, offering both unparalleled opportunities for democratic advancement and significant risks of backsliding. Because effective democracy support depends on sustained partnerships and engagement with like-minded policymakers and citizens, it is essential that priorities be oriented toward addressing electoral vulnerabilities. Doing so allows democratic processes to function as intended and evolve over time, while also enhancing the effectiveness of democracy support efforts.

## 5 Media & Information Environment

Challenges related to the media and information environment emerge as a priority for democracy support efforts, particularly in countries that experience regular fluctuation between electoral democracy and electoral authoritarianism. Key factors include the degree of government censorship over the media (V-Dem v2mecenefm) and the extent of pluralism in perspectives conveyed by the media ecosystem (V-Dem v2merange).

In Georgia, the pluralism and diversity of the media environment has come under increasing pressure amid deepening political polarisation and expanding government influence. Some improvements were observed in the aftermath of the 2003 Rose Revolution (Muskhelishvili, 2011); however, successive administrations have continued to exert influence over major broadcasters, fostering a media landscape in which outlets tend to align with political camps rather than operate as independent providers of information (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021).

These dynamics intensified in 2023 following the proposal of the controversial “foreign agents” legislation, which sought to stigmatise foreign-funded organisations and impose disproportionate regulatory obligations. Although the bill was ultimately withdrawn after mass protests and strong international criticism – including from media watchdogs and EU institutions – its introduction alone heightened societal tensions and further polarised the media sphere. Media outlets critical of the government faced increased regulatory and financial pressure, while pro-government actors consolidated control over key communication platforms, further constraining pluralistic public debate. As a result, international observers, among them international media outlets such as *The Times* and *The Guardian*, raised concerns about the implications of these developments for Georgia’s democratic trajectory and prospects for EU integration (The Times, 2024).

In Armenia, media freedom has deteriorated markedly during the period of electoral democracy downturn observed since 2020. Experts note that in the aftermath of the 2020 war, authorities imposed restrictions on civil liberties, introduced new censorship measures, and increasingly criminalised criticism of the government. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) raised concerns regarding Armenia’s extensive use of martial law and pandemic-related emergency powers, pointing to delayed responses to media inquiries and restrictions on permissible sources (Doydoyan, 2020; Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe [PACE], 2022).

Although the 2020 Law on Audiovisual Media introduced updated regulatory standards, it was criticised for ambiguous provisions related to emergency powers, licensing procedures, and limited support for media self-regulation. Media conditions further deteriorated following the adoption of the 2023 Law on Electronic Communications, which significantly expanded executive authority to block websites and censor content in the absence of robust institutional safeguards (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023; Eurasianet, 2023; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2021).

The cases of Armenia and Georgia illustrate how media control and censorship erode trust in democracy support initiatives and increase vulnerabilities to external influence. Crucially, they also demonstrate a mutually reinforcing relationship with other domestic factors – such as executive overreach and electoral manipulation – that further inhibit democratic consolidation. Accordingly, democracy support initiatives in the Eastern Neighbourhood should prioritise the establishment and development of a pluralistic media ecosystem, particularly in vulnerable democracies, in order to ensure that gains achieved through democracy support are durable.

## 6 Executive Power and Oversight

Challenges related to executive power and oversight expectedly constrain both the scope and effectiveness of democracy support in countries experiencing persistent autocratisation, but they also emerge as key vulnerabilities in countries undergoing democratisation openings. Factors include whether the head of state and/or head of government exercises de facto control over cabinet appointments (V-Dem v2exdjcbhg; v2exdfcbhs), the extent to which members of the executive respect constitutional rules (V-Dem v2exrescon), and the capacity of oversight bodies – such as prosecutors or ombuds institutions – to investigate and hold the executive accountable for unconstitutional or illegal actions (V-Dem v2lgotovst).

In the case of Azerbaijan, since the adoption of the 1995 Constitution, the president has exercised extensive authority over executive appointments, encompassing not only the prime minister and cabinet ministers but also the heads of agencies, commissions, and local executive authorities. In practice, this control extends to deputy ministers and departmental leadership, with appointments subject to presidential pre-approval, reinforcing a highly centralised system of governance (The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1995/24 August 2002; 18 March 2009; 26 September 2016).

Legislative oversight has remained minimal. Parliamentary approval is formally required only for the appointment of the prime minister and may be bypassed after two rejections, leaving the prime minister with no substantive role in executive appointments. Constitutional amendments in 2002, 2009, and 2016 further entrenched presidential authority by altering succession rules, abolishing term limits, extending presidential mandates, creating a vice presidency appointed by the president, and empowering the executive to dissolve the legislature (Council of Europe, 2016; RFE/RL, 2016; Robinson & Antidze, 2009; RFE/RL, 2002). As a result, accountability mechanisms such as no-confidence votes and legislative hearings remain largely symbolic.

Today, political power in Azerbaijan is overwhelmingly concentrated in the presidency, reflecting a shift away from the more diffuse patrimonial governance of the 1990s and the oligarchic arrangements of the 2000s. Elite cohesion is at an unprecedented level, with limited prospects for internal contestation. While political advancement now formally combines competence with loyalty, experts note that this dual logic primarily serves to enhance governance efficiency while sustaining highly personalised rule, often exposing tensions between technocratic performance and political control (Cornell, 2025; Ibadoghlu, 2021; Guliyev, 2009).

In Ukraine, the scope of executive power has long shaped the country's regime trajectory, and the 2020-2021 stasis period reaffirmed the centrality of presidential dominance. While the wartime circumstances facing the country since 2022 explain recent surges in executive dominance, trends have been observed long before that. Although the post-2014 constitution formally established a premier-presidential system, the Servant of the People parliamentary majority – largely composed of inexperienced MPs elected on the strength of Zelenskyy's personal popularity – ultimately reinforced executive primacy over the cabinet. Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal's unprecedentedly long tenure reflected alignment with presidential preferences rather than enhanced institutional resilience. This dynamic underscores one of Ukraine's most structural vulnerabilities: presidential control has persisted despite formal rules intended to constrain or rebalance executive-legislative relations.

Oversight institutions likewise exhibited stagnation during 2020-2021. The anti-corruption ecosystem – including NABU, SAPO, and ARMA – suffered from leadership delays, procedural blockages, and contested appointments. Broader accountability bodies, such as the State Audit Service, the Prosecutor General’s Office, and the Ombudsman’s Office, experienced incomplete reform, vulnerability to interference, and chronic underfunding (Novicky & Tugushi, 2022; Radio Svoboda, 2021; Prokip, 2020). Civil society, long regarded as the backbone of Ukrainian oversight, remained active but overstretched and increasingly dependent on external funding. Taken together, these patterns point to a systemic accountability gap: institutions tasked with constraining executive authority rarely achieved the autonomy or capacity required to do so.

Executive accountability is a central driver of democratic consolidation, yet it is among the most difficult democratic elements to embed, as it requires sustained institutional development and long-term capacity building. For democracy support to achieve consistent and durable progress, initiatives should focus on establishing mechanisms that constrain executive overreach – whether through conditionality, by capitalising on democratic openings, or by strengthening watchdog institutions through targeted resources and support.

## 7 Civil Society and Association Rights

Finally, challenges related to civil society and association rights are particularly acute in countries characterised by entrenched authoritarianism or where governments engaging in democratic backsliding seek to consolidate authoritarian practices. Key factors include the degree to which governments repress civil society (v2csreprss) and the extent to which they retain control over CSO entry and exit (v2cseeorgs). In Belarus, as of 2023, the independent civil society landscape has been almost entirely dismantled domestically. The Ministry of Justice continues to deny re-registration applications for non-governmental organisations, while human rights defenders and CSO workers face criminal prosecution, long-term imprisonment, and pervasive surveillance (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Many civil society actors have been forced into exile, with significant numbers concentrating in Lithuania, Poland, and Georgia. This repressive environment is sustained through a combination of overt measures – such as police raids, organisational liquidations, and judicial harassment – and more subtle strategies, including public discreditation and regulatory obstruction (Amnesty International, 2022).

This reality reflects long-standing suppressive patterns in Belarus. CSO development has historically taken place under an authoritarian regime that consistently relied on legal and bureaucratic restrictions to constrain civic space. Organisations faced a complex and politicised registration system, frequently resulting in the denial of legal status for groups perceived as oppositional. State policy combined repression with conditional tolerance: “non-political” CSOs, particularly those engaged in service delivery or cultural activities, were permitted limited space to operate provided they avoided political engagement, while independent organisations such as Viasna were systematically denied registration and subjected to intimidation (Freedom House, 2020).

Between 2014 and 2020, a brief period of partial liberalisation allowed new organisations to emerge, encouraging civic engagement and facilitating limited crowdfunding initiatives. However, this tentative opening collapsed in 2020, when newly mobilised grassroots actors became politically engaged in response to the COVID-19 crisis and the falsified presidential election (OECD, 2021). Following the subsequent crackdown, the regime sharply intensified its control over civil society. By 2023, more than 1,000 CSOs had been liquidated or forced to self-dissolve, while remaining legal organisations faced constant surveillance, restrictive legislation, and repeated re-registration hurdles (CSOSI, 2023). As the CSOSI 2023 report notes, Belarus experienced one of the most severe civil society closures in the region, with profound barriers to founding new organisations, obtaining permits, or accessing funding. Operating without registration has been criminalised, and exile-based organisations continue to face significant challenges in reaching domestic constituencies (CIVICUS, 2023). Despite this, efforts to sustain civic engagement persist across borders and through informal networks, providing one of the few remaining channels for pro-democratic mobilisation in Belarus.

In Georgia, the proposal of the “foreign agents” bill revealed a growing willingness on the part of the authorities to formalise restrictions on civil society. Historically, civil society organisations (CSOs) in Georgia have played a pivotal role in advancing democratic accountability, human rights, and good governance. Modelled on legislation from more authoritarian contexts, the bill sought to stigmatise foreign-funded organisations and impose disproportionate reporting requirements. Its introduction signalled a broader governmental intent to curtail civil society influence and reinforced ongoing patterns of democratic backsliding (European Commission, 2023). Experts further noted that prominent watchdog and human rights organisations have increasingly faced pressure through selective investigations, while public vilification by ruling party officials and state-aligned media has become more widespread. These developments stand in direct tension with Georgia’s EU integration ambitions and risk eroding the foundations of participatory democracy.

Investing in civil society has the potential to foster the organic diffusion of democratic norms, generating both direct and longer-term effects on democratic outcomes. While CSOs have long been a central channel of democracy support for the EU and its member states, they should be prioritised particularly in contexts where government-led avenues for cooperation have been closed or where backsliding governments seek to silence pro-democratic grassroots mobilisation.

## 8 Conclusion

This report has shown that domestic political factors play a decisive role in shaping both the effectiveness and the appropriate prioritisation of EU democracy support in the Eastern Neighbourhood. By applying the regime states framework, the analysis moves beyond static regime classifications and highlights how recent trajectories of stability, downturn, upturn, or stasis condition democratic vulnerabilities and reform opportunities. This dynamic perspective is essential for designing democracy support strategies that are responsive to real-time political developments.

Across the six Eastern Neighbourhood countries, five categories of domestic factors consistently structure democracy support needs: *judicial independence and accountability*; *electoral integrity*; *the media and information environment*; *executive power and oversight*; and *civil society and association rights*. While these factors manifest differently depending on regime state, the analysis reveals that weaknesses in judicial independence and accountability constitute a foundational constraint on democratic consolidation across the region. Without credible, impartial, and autonomous judicial institutions, reforms in other domains remain fragile and reversible.

The findings further demonstrate that electoral processes and media environments are particularly pivotal in countries experiencing fluctuation between electoral democracy and electoral authoritarianism. In such contexts, electoral integrity and pluralistic information ecosystems can either stabilise democratic progress or accelerate democratic decline. Similarly, unchecked executive power and weakened oversight institutions emerge as central obstacles both in entrenched autocracies and in countries undergoing democratic openings, where early failures to constrain executive dominance can undermine longer-term consolidation.

For EU democracy support, these insights point to four overarching implications. First, democracy assistance must be explicitly regime-sensitive, calibrating priorities and instruments to the most recent regime state. Second, support should be time-sensitive, with particular emphasis on intervening early during democratic openings or initial downturns, when institutional paths are still malleable. These two insights imply adopting greater flexibility in democracy support programmes, downscaling interventions that fail to address emerging vulnerabilities, and upscaling support in areas of need—even where prior experience or existing infrastructure is limited. Third, democracy support should prioritise building durable institutional constraints – especially in the judiciary, oversight bodies, and civil society – that can outlast individual political cycles and administrations. This implies greater conditionality, which, while it might risk underpronouncing democratic progress, it can prove instrumental to destabilising backsliding and ED downturn by embedding greater

domestic institutional constraints. Finally, the fact that progress has been made in certain areas, does not mean policy makers should tone down effort of further enhancing and supporting less problematic areas.

In sum, the report reinforces the argument that democracy support in the Eastern Neighbourhood must be both principled and pragmatic. By grounding policy choices in a nuanced understanding of domestic political conditions and regime dynamics, the EU can better target its support, mitigate the risks of democratic backsliding, and enhance the long-term resilience of democratic institutions across the region.

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