



# REDEMOS

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

## REDEMOS Policy Paper D5.1b

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# Regime clusters and challenges to democratisation in the eastern neighbourhood: Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine

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## Executive Summary

The REDEMOS Policy Paper D5.1b examines the challenges and requirements of democratic consolidation across Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Developed alongside D5.1a, it seeks to sharpen the strategic focus of EU democracy support by advocating for a regime-sensitive approach grounded in the most up-to-date trajectories of democratic development.

The analysis builds on the regime state typology introduced in D5.2, which assesses political regimes according to three key dimensions: (a) their position on the autocracy-democracy continuum; (b) whether the regime is in a static or dynamic condition; and if dynamic, (c) the direction and nature of regime change. Drawing on data from the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI), the paper traces the evolution of regime states between 1990 and 2023 in the four countries, with a particular focus on identifying the most recent regime states and significant developments between 2022 and 2023 that may not yet have resulted in formal regime state reclassification.

Asserting that policy action must be tailored to contemporary regime dynamics, the paper complements LDI data with expert country input. Experts were asked to review descriptive rankings of LDI component indicators, based on their average values over the most recent regime-state period, in order to identify persistently weaker or recently weakening areas of democratic performance. This approach serves a diagnostic rather than explanatory purpose: it does not assess which indicators contribute most to the overall LDI, but instead highlights those dimensions where democratic performance remains consistently fragile or has recently declined. Using these diagnostics, experts formulated policy-relevant recommendations aligned with country-specific institutional realities. Through this multi-method design, the paper offers timely policy advice for EU and national policymakers, reflecting context-sensitive dynamics and capturing the differing status quos in the region's paths toward democratisation.

The findings reveal four distinct regime trajectories. Armenia has experienced democratic backsliding since 2020, reflected in persistently weaker judicial independence, electoral trust deficits, and increased media censorship. Georgia remained stable until 2022 but is now undergoing democratic deterioration, visible in declining media pluralism, growing government disinformation, and restrictions on civil society. Moldova demonstrated democratic gains from 2019 to 2022, particularly in electoral and judicial domains, but has since shown signs of regression due to implementation gaps and limited governance effectiveness. Ukraine, under wartime conditions, has shown institutional resilience and overall LDI improvement, though persistent challenges around executive dominance and judicial politicisation remain.

To respond effectively, the EU must tailor its democracy support to each country's regime state, understood as both context-specific and time-sensitive. Armenia requires renewed focus on electoral reform, judicial independence, and media freedom. In Georgia, restoring institutional checks and reversing legislative restrictions on civil society and the media are urgent. Moldova needs deeper support for judicial accountability and administrative reform, anchored in enforceable conditionality. Ukraine, despite progress, demands sustained EU engagement in judicial reform, executive oversight, and institutional depoliticisation, particularly to consolidate gains in a post-conflict future.

Across all four cases, the EU must invest in watchdog institutions, reinforce political conditionality, and strengthen links between local actors and European standards. Democracy assistance must be principled but pragmatic, adapting to regime-specific realities while ensuring long-term accountability and resilience.

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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>EA</b>	Electoral Autocracy
<b>ED</b>	Electoral Democracy
<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>NABU</b>	National Bureau of Investigation
<b>OSCE</b>	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
<b>ODIHR</b>	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
<b>SAPO</b>	Specialized Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office
<b>SCM</b>	Superior Council of Magistracy
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>V-Dem</b>	Varieties of Democracy (research project and dataset)

## Introduction

Policy action to promote democratisation must be tailored to contemporary regime dynamics. Although Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have made overall progress toward democracy over the past three decades, they occupy distinct regime states today, marked by diverging trajectories and challenges. To guide EU and national policy design, the paper relies on a structured ranking of component indicators of the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI). This procedure is not meant to model causation or produce statistical inference. Rather, it identifies patterns of persistently low or declining performance across institutional domains, offering a transparent, replicable means to diagnose areas where democratic resilience is weakest or reform momentum strongest.

This policy paper draws on the regime states framework introduced in REDEMOS D5.2 (Buşcaneanu & Kneuer, 2024) to examine the present-day obstacles to democratic consolidation in the four countries. Using an innovative two-step approach, it combines V-Dem data with expert insights to identify persistently weaker and recently weakening areas of democratic performance that characterise current regime states and trends, and to generate context-sensitive recommendations for democracy support. The approach is diagnostic rather than explanatory: it does not assess which indicators contribute most to the overall LDI, but highlights those dimensions where democratic performance remains fragile or shows recent decline.

The paper begins by outlining its conceptual approach and methodology. It then turns to four country-specific sections that assess regime trajectories, identify key institutional vulnerabilities, and offer targeted policy recommendations. The conclusion synthesises key takeaways, compares country experiences, and highlights shared and country-specific priorities.

The findings reveal four distinct regime trajectories. Armenia has experienced democratic backsliding since 2020, reflected in weakened judicial independence, electoral trust deficits, and increased media censorship. Georgia remained stable until 2022 but is now undergoing democratic deterioration, visible in declining media pluralism, increasing government disinformation, and restrictions on civil society. Moldova demonstrated democratic gains from 2019 to 2022, particularly in electoral and judicial domains, but has since shown signs of regression due to implementation gaps and low governance effectiveness. Ukraine, under wartime conditions, has shown institutional resilience and overall LDI improvement, though persistent challenges around executive dominance and judicial politicisation remain.

To respond effectively, the EU must tailor its democracy support to each country's regime state, understood as both context-specific and time-sensitive. Armenia requires renewed focus on electoral reform, judicial independence, and media freedom. In Georgia, restoring institutional checks and reversing legislative restrictions on civil society and the media are urgent. Moldova needs deeper support for judicial accountability and administrative reform, anchored in enforceable conditionality. Ukraine, despite progress, demands sustained EU engagement in judicial reform, executive oversight, and institutional depoliticisation, particularly to consolidate gains in a post-conflict future.

Across all four cases, the EU must invest in watchdog institutions, reinforce political conditionality, and strengthen links between local actors and European standards. Democracy assistance must be principled but pragmatic, adapting to regime-specific realities while ensuring long-term accountability and resilience.

## The Framework of Regime States

We believe that a regime-sensitive approach to external democracy support should start from a precise and diagnostic assessment of target political regimes (Kurki, 2008; Hobson, 2009). To diagnose political regimes in the Eastern Neighbourhood region, we rely on the regime states framework (Buşcaneanu & Kneuer, 2024), which rests on the regime classification borrowed from Lührmann et al. (2018). Accordingly, countries can

be classified into four regime categories: closed autocracy (CA), electoral autocracy (EA), electoral democracy (ED), and liberal democracy (LD). 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, rather than treating these categories as rigid and separate, the framework assumes that political regimes exist on an autocracy–democracy continuum, ranging from full autocracy to full democracy. This perspective allows for tracking gradual political changes rather than focusing solely on dramatic shifts. Countries rarely transform overnight from dictatorship to full democracy or vice versa; instead, they tend to move incrementally along this spectrum. Third, political regimes can be grouped into two broad segments: an autocratic segment, which includes closed and electoral autocracies, and a democratic segment, which consists of electoral and liberal democracies.

Building on these three assumptions, we distinguish three types of regime states. We define regime states as mutually exclusive manifestations of political regimes on the autocracy–democracy continuum, encompassing either static conditions or dynamic changes within and between regime categories unfolding within a connected time period. The first type consists of static polities, where no meaningful regime change occurs. In autocratic regimes, this condition is referred to as stasis, while in democratic systems, it is described as stability. Stability in democracies is generally seen as a positive outcome, reinforcing institutional resilience and political inclusion (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). In contrast, autocratic stasis is generally negative, as it prolongs repression and political exclusion. Despite these substantive differences, both autocratic stasis and democratic stability define static political regimes that do not experience meaningful change in quality over a connected time period.

The second type of regime states involves internal change without full transition, where a country experiences noticeable shifts in governance quality while remaining within the same regime category. These shifts can be classified as either downturns or upturns. A downturn occurs when regime quality deteriorates, for example, due to increased media restrictions, weakened institutional independence, or electoral malpractice. Conversely, an upturn occurs when regime quality improves, such as through stronger judicial independence or expanded political freedoms. These changes do not push a country into a new regime category but indicate significant fluctuations within its existing political system. Monitoring such movements is essential for diagnosing whether a country is at risk of further decline or positioned for democratic progress.

The third type of regime states involves transitions between regime categories, signalling a fundamental shift in regime quality. When a country moves leftward on the autocracy–democracy continuum, this is referred to as regression, as when an electoral democracy turns into an electoral autocracy. Conversely, a rightward movement is a progression, as when an electoral autocracy transitions into an electoral democracy. These shifts represent regime change in *kind* rather than in *degree* (Sartori, 1970). A transition from electoral autocracy to electoral democracy marks an autocratic breakdown, whereas a shift from electoral democracy to electoral autocracy represents a democratic breakdown. For further detail on the regime-states framework, see Buşcaneanu and Kneuer (2024). We illustrate all three types of regime states in Figure 1.

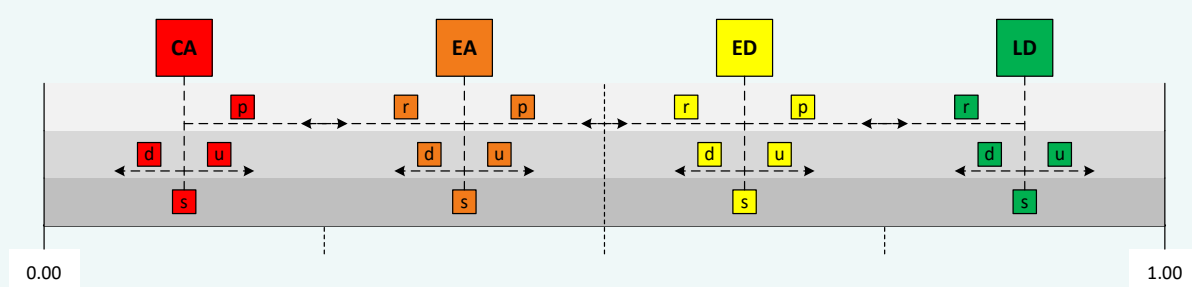


Figure 1: Regime States

*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 type of data used.

The regime states framework provides practical diagnostic insights for policymakers and democracy support organisations. Understanding where a country stands on the autocracy–democracy continuum enables more precise and context-sensitive policy interventions. By identifying whether a regime is static or in flux, decision-makers can better anticipate risks and seize opportunities to strengthen democratic institutions or prevent backsliding. Recognising whether a shift represents an upturn, downturn, regression, or progression ensures that interventions are appropriately calibrated to the political context. For instance, if a country is improving its regime quality but still remains an electoral autocracy, efforts should focus on enhancing electoral integrity and expanding civil liberties. If a country faces the risk of democratic breakdown, priority should be placed on protecting institutional checks and balances.

Rather than viewing regime diagnosis as a purely academic exercise, the framework offers a diagnostic lens for external actors: it enables context-aware responses grounded in empirical trends. The next section applies this framework to four countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood – Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – that have experienced democratisation trajectories in recent years.

## Analyzing Regime Dynamics in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine

### Long-term Trajectory and Regime Transitions

Based on data from the LDI (Coppedge et al., 2024) and the regime classification approaches proposed by Riedl et al. (2024) and Buşcaneanu and Kneuer (2024), Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and – to a lesser extent – Ukraine experienced overall improvements in democratic quality between 1990 and 2023.

As illustrated in Figure 2, Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova exhibited a long-term upward trend, with all three countries progressing to a state of ED during the 2010s. Meanwhile, Ukraine experienced an upturn and transition to ED during the 2000s, followed by a regression to EA in the early 2010s, and renewed democratic progress toward the end of the decade.

Overall, between 1990 and 2023, Armenia experienced one instance of regime transition, Ukraine two, and Moldova and Georgia three each. Ukraine and Moldova benefited from the democratic openings of the post-Soviet era (Fukuyama, 1989; Przeworski, 1992; Fish, 1999; McFaul, 2002), with Ukraine experiencing an upturn and Moldova progressing to ED during the early 1990s. Conversely, Georgia and Armenia experienced episodes of democratic downturn. However, neither conclusively transitioned from EA to CA, as Georgia’s 1992 regression to CA – according to LDI point estimates – is likely attributable to measurement variance (Buşcaneanu & Kneuer, 2024).

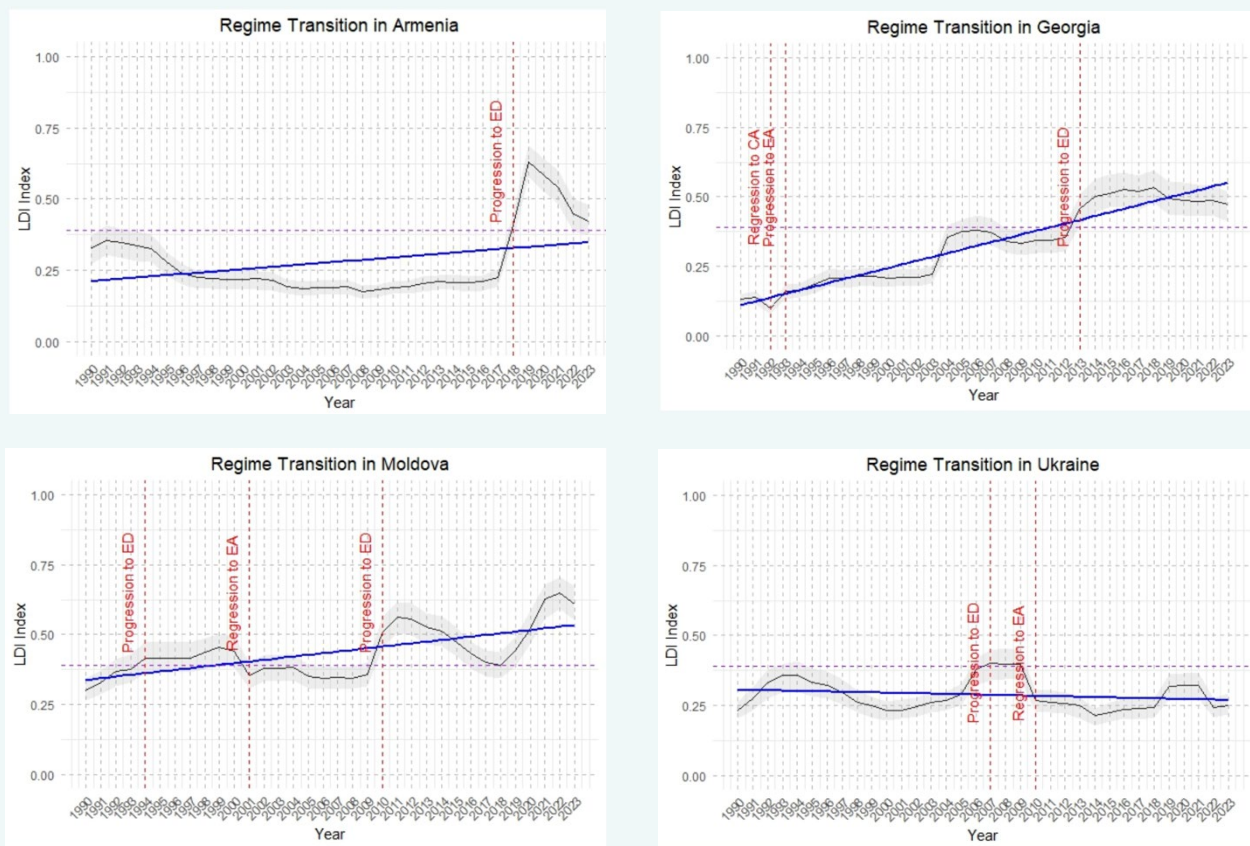
In Moldova, the 1994 progression to ED capped a period of continuous political transformation that had begun in 1990. The subsequent ascension to power of the conservative Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) was accompanied by declines across several LDI dimensions – particularly legislative constraints on the executive – coinciding with a regression to EA in 2001. Moldova returned to ED in 2010, following the transfer of power to the pro-EU Alliance for European Integration (AIE) (Tudoroiu, 2011; Tudoroiu, 2015; Coppedge et al., 2024).

In Ukraine, the progression to ED in 2007 followed the Orange Revolution of 2004–2005 and a series of constitutional amendments introduced during the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko, which were reflected in improvements across various LDI dimensions. The subsequent tenure of Viktor Yanukovich coincided with a

regression to EA, as constitutional revisions reinstated the institutional equilibrium that had existed prior to the 2004–2006 reforms (Matsiyevsky, 2018; Coppedge et al., 2024).

Georgia hovered around the threshold between EA and CA during the 1990s, before witnessing a significant upturn at the turn of the century, particularly in the aftermath of the 2003 Rose Revolution. The first peaceful transfer of power in 2012, along with associated improvements across LDI indicators, marked the progression to ED in 2013 and a continued upward trend until the late 2010s, before a renewed, albeit modest, decline began in 2018 (Muskhelishvili, 2011; Coppedge et al., 2024).

Finally, after nearly two decades of stable EA, Armenia experienced a transition to ED in 2018, following the Velvet Revolution and the rise to power of Nikol Pashinyan and the My Step Alliance, which included the Civil Contract party (Iskandaryan, 2018; Coppedge et al., 2024).



**Figure 2: Regime trajectory and transitions in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine**

*Notes:* The figure illustrates regime trajectory and transitions in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in 1990-2023.

## Regime States

As shown in Table 1, Armenia experienced successive periods of EA stasis during the 1990s and 2010s (1992–1993; 1998–2002; 2004–2007; and 2013–2016), which were interrupted by a period of EA downturn (1994–1997). It should be noted that the framework of regime states requires at least two consecutive years of stasis, upturn, or downturn to classify a regime state. As such, the individual years omitted from Table 1 exhibited unsustained fluctuations within the existing regime category.

Following independence in 1991, Levon Ter-Petrosyan was elected as Armenia’s first president by an overwhelming majority, guiding the country through the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988–1994) (Kasim,

2002). However, the 1996 presidential election – held in the aftermath of the conflict – was marred by accusations of electoral fraud and mass protests, marking a period of downturn reflected in declines in LDI indicators related to electoral integrity and judicial constraints (Coppedge et al., 2024). After Ter-Petrosyan’s resignation in 1998, Armenia experienced prolonged political instability and leadership turnover until the mid-2000s, a period punctuated by the assassination of Prime Minister Vazgen Sargsyan in 1999 (Ohanyan and Broers, 2020). EA stasis persisted until 2017, particularly following the 2015 constitutional reform that sought to consolidate former President Serzh Sargsyan’s influence through the creation of a strengthened prime ministerial role.

The 2018 Velvet Revolution brought Serzh Sargsyan’s resignation and the appointment of Nikol Pashinyan, leader of the Civil Contract party, as Prime Minister (Iskandaryan, 2018). This political transition coincided with Armenia’s progression to ED, reflected in improvements across most LDI dimensions, particularly in free and fair elections (Coppedge et al., 2024). Since 2020, however, a renewed state of downturn has been observed – though still within LDI thresholds for ED – with Armenia experiencing the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (2020) and another period of political instability.

Georgia had a steadier path to ED, with alternating periods of EA upturn (1995–1996 and 2003–2005) and EA stasis (1997–2002; 2006–2007; 2009–2011). The post-Soviet transition was marked by open elections in 1990 but also by rebellion and civil war in 1991 (Freedom House, 2016), which produced LDI fluctuations between ED and CA. Since 1995, the ratification of the first modern Georgian constitution marked the beginning of gradual democratic development. In the early 2000s, the ruling Citizens Union of Georgia, led by President Eduard Shevardnadze, began facing internal fragmentation and electoral setbacks. While the party retained power in the 2003 parliamentary elections, widespread allegations of electoral fraud coincided with the Rose Revolution, followed by constitutional reforms to enhance checks and balances and limit corruption (Muskhelishvili, 2011).

Transition to ED was not reached until 2012, when, following additional constitutional amendments in 2010, Georgian Dream came to power through the country’s first peaceful transfer of authority, led by Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. Further constitutional amendments introduced in 2017–2018 aimed to strengthen parliamentary rule, signalling ED consolidation (Freedom House, 2018; Venice Commission, 2017). Since 2022, however, renewed LDI decline has been observed (Coppedge et al., 2024).

In Moldova, the period from 1990 to 2023 was marked by an early transition to ED in 1994, followed by regression to EA around the turn of the century and a prolonged phase of EA stasis lasting until 2008. The country returned to ED in 2009, experienced a period of ED downturn from 2013 to 2017, and saw an ED upturn between 2019 and 2022.

Moldova’s 1994 Constitution, founded on principles of justice and political pluralism, marked the culmination of earlier improvements in key LDI dimensions, particularly legislative and judicial constraints and free and fair elections (Coppedge et al., 2024). This period also reflected a political pivot toward self-determination, characterised by a move away from close ties with Russia and the abandonment of reunification prospects with Romania. The 2001 parliamentary elections, which brought the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova to power, were accompanied by declines in several LDI dimensions, particularly those linked to institutional independence (Tudoroiu, 2011). This period was marked by expanding state control over institutions and media.

Contested parliamentary elections in April 2009 were followed by mass protests over alleged electoral fraud—the so-called “Twitter Revolution” (Mungiu-Pippidi & Munteanu, 2009). These events coincided with the rise of the pro-EU Alliance for European Integration (AIE), which introduced a new reform agenda and was reflected in Moldova’s return to ED. However, the momentum for democratic consolidation slowed during the 2010s, which were characterised by institutional fragility and elite fragmentation. The situation was further compounded by the 2014 banking scandal, in which more than \$1 billion vanished from Moldovan banks, severely undermining public trust in democratic institutions (Pilkington, 2015).

The ED upturn observed between 2019 and 2022 corresponded with the election of President Maia Sandu, whose administration reaffirmed Moldova’s pro-European orientation and advanced democratic reform commitments (Coppedge et al., 2024). Since 2022, however, Moldova has entered another period of LDI decline.

In Ukraine, an early post-Soviet ED upturn (1991–1993) was followed by a prolonged EA downturn (1995–2000). A renewed upturn (2002–2003) was followed by a progression to ED (2005–2007). However, ED stability was short-lived (2008–2009), as regression to EA (2010) was succeeded by successive periods of EA stasis (2011–2013; 2017–2018; and 2020–2021), and a renewed upward trajectory in LDI since 2022.

The early post-Soviet years (1991–1993) were characterised by LDI improvements associated with the adoption of democratic institutions and electoral competition. The 1994–2000 period, however, reflected regression to EA, as the presidency of Leonid Kuchma increasingly consolidated executive control over political institutions and media (D’Anieri, 2003).

A renewed upturn in 2002–2003 was accompanied by growing civic mobilisation and dissatisfaction with authoritarian practices, culminating in the 2004 Orange Revolution following mass protests over electoral fraud. The rerun of the presidential election resulted in the victory of opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko, marking Ukraine’s transition to ED in 2005. This period of ED (2005–2007) was brief and fragile. From 2010, under President Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine returned to EA, followed by multiple periods of stasis (McFaul, 2007).

The Euromaidan protests in late 2013 and early 2014, triggered by Yanukovich’s decision to suspend the EU Association Agreement, coincided with a nationwide movement demanding democratic reform. Despite Yanukovich’s removal in February 2014, the subsequent period was marked by war in eastern Ukraine, annexation of Crimea by Russia, and inconsistent reform progress, reflected in continued EA stasis (Matsiyevsky, 2018; Coppedge et al., 2024). Since 2022, however, Ukraine has again shown an upward trajectory in LDI.

**Table 1: Regime states in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine**

Years	Regime state	Change
1992, 1993	EA stasis	No change
1994, 1995, 1996, 1997	EA downturn	Negative
1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002	EA stasis	No change
2004, 2005, 2006, 2007	EA stasis	No change
2013, 2014, 2015, 2016	EA stasis	No change
2017, 2018, 2019	Progression to ED	Positive
2020, 2021, 2022, 2023	ED downturn	Negative

Years	Regime state	Change
1992	Regression to CA	Negative
1993	Progression to EA	Positive
1995, 1996	EA upturn	Positive
1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002	EA stasis	No change
2003, 2004, 2005	EA upturn	Positive
2006, 2007	EA stasis	No change
2009, 2010, 2011	EA stasis	No change
2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016	Progression to ED	Positive
2020, 2021, 2022	ED stability	No change

Years	Regime state	Change
1991, 1992	EA upturn	Positive
1994	Progression to ED	Positive
1995, 1996, 1997	ED stability	No change
1998, 1999	ED upturn	Positive
2000, 2001	Regression to EA	Negative
2003, 2004	EA stasis	No change
2006, 2007, 2008	EA stasis	No change
2009, 2010, 2011	Progression to ED	Positive
2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017	ED downturn	Negative
2019, 2020, 2021, 2022	ED upturn	Positive

Years	Regime state	Change
1991, 1992, 1993	EA upturn	Positive
1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000	EA downturn	Negative
2002, 2003	EA upturn	Positive
2005, 2006, 2007	Progression to ED	Positive
2008, 2009	ED stability	No change
2010	Regression to EA	Negative
2011, 2012, 2013	EA stasis	No change
2015, 2016	EA upturn	Positive
2017, 2018	EA stasis	No change
2020, 2021	EA stasis	No change

Notes: The table includes all regime states experienced by Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in the period 1990-2023 (based on LDI).

## Understanding the Most Recent Regime States

When formulating policy implications, it is essential to focus on the most recent regime state of each country: ED downturn for Armenia (2020–2023), ED stability for Georgia (2020–2022), ED upturn for Moldova (2019–2022), and EA stasis for Ukraine (2020–2021). Moreover, we also examine noteworthy changes between 2022 and 2023 that do not meet the minimum threshold of two consecutive years required to constitute a new regime state, but which nonetheless offer important indications about current and future trendlines. Specifically, we consider the decline in LDI observed in Georgia and Moldova, and the improvement recorded in Ukraine during this period.

The ranking exercise that follows is designed to serve as a heuristic tool for policy-oriented diagnostics. It allows researchers and policymakers to visualise which institutional dimensions are most weakened within each country's most recent regime state. The approach does not determine the statistical drivers of regime change nor quantify the relative importance of each variable. Instead, it highlights areas of institutional performance that merit closer attention when designing democracy support strategies. In this sense, the ranking is a descriptive lens to structure interpretation, not a test of causality.

We employ a two-step diagnostic approach combining quantitative ranking with expert-informed validation. In the first step, we rely on data from the LDI. The LDI (v2x\_libdem) is a composite measure comprising two key components: the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) (v2x\_polyarchy) and the Liberal Component Index (LCI) (v2x\_liberal). The EDI captures the procedural core of democracy, including free and fair elections, universal suffrage, and meaningful citizen participation. In contrast, the LCI measures the checks and balances that constrain executive power and protect individual freedoms and the rule of law (Coppedge et al., 2024). Together, these components allow the LDI to summarise overall democratic quality, extending beyond electoral processes to assess whether government authority is exercised within the rule of law, civil liberties are respected, and institutional constraints are effective.

For each country, we calculate the arithmetic mean of every LDI component indicator over the duration of the most recent regime state (e.g. ED downturn, upturn, stability, or EA stasis). Averaging the indicator values across the regime period serves a clear diagnostic purpose: it smooths short-term volatility, highlights enduring institutional patterns, and captures the structural level of democratic performance that characterises the regime's equilibrium. This procedure enables us to detect long-term weaknesses or strengths rather than temporary fluctuations caused by singular political events. The resulting average thus reflects the consolidated condition of each institutional domain under a given regime configuration. Once the mean values are computed, all indicators are ranked within each country according to their average scores. For downturns and stasis, the lowest-scoring indicators are interpreted as the most persistently weak domains; for upturns, the indicators showing the largest average gains are considered the most improved. These rankings are not causal explanations and do not measure statistical contribution or weight. Instead, they serve as diagnostic signals, pointing to institutional dimensions where fragility or progress has been most sustained over the regime period.

It should also be noted that while this ranking-based approach offers a structured diagnostic overview, it is important to clarify that the number of lowest-ranking indicators identified for each case is not fixed by any statistical rule. The purpose is to maintain analytical comparability across countries while ensuring that the selection remains both interpretable and policy-relevant. The focus on a limited subset of lowest-ranking indicators reflects a pragmatic balance between inclusiveness and clarity: it captures the institutional domains that most persistently underperform during a given regime period, without diluting attention across the entire set of variables. This selection should therefore be understood as illustrative rather than exhaustive. It does not imply that indicators outside the identified subset are insignificant or irrelevant for understanding the regime state. All LDI components contribute to the composite measure of democratic quality, but highlighting those that remain persistently weaker allows for a more targeted and policy-oriented interpretation of institutional fragility and reform needs. Additionally, we assess indicators showing the largest changes between 2022 and 2023 to capture emerging patterns—declines in Georgia and Moldova and improvements in Ukraine—that may signal early directional shifts. In these cases, the ranking helps to

visualise short-term trend reversals, while still maintaining the broader temporal focus on regime-period averages.

In the second step, we incorporate qualitative expert validation to assess the face validity and contextual relevance of the ranked indicators. Experts were asked to comment on whether the identified indicators meaningfully reflect current political dynamics and to suggest additional indicators—both within the LDI and from the broader V-Dem dataset—that they considered relevant for interpreting current regime states and trajectories. This validation ensures that the quantitative rankings are interpreted in light of contextual knowledge, correcting for potential data artefacts and anchoring the findings in national realities.

Overall, the two-step approach links empirical precision with contextual interpretation. The first step provides a systematic and replicable identification of persistently weaker or improving institutional domains, while the second ensures that these patterns are evaluated through the lens of expert judgment. The results should therefore be understood as diagnostic heuristics rather than inferential outcomes—they map where democratic performance has been consistently low or high, not why these patterns have emerged. It is important to emphasise that the ranking outcomes should not be overinterpreted as causal determinants of regime state classification. They are intended to guide qualitative interpretation and policy discussion by identifying areas where democratic institutions are either consolidating or under stress. The subsequent country analyses, therefore, discuss these indicators as illustrative domains of fragility or resilience rather than as statistically proven causes of regime change.

### Armenia: Persistently Weaker Areas in ED Downturn (2020-2023)

Following the previously outlined two-step diagnostic approach, Armenia's ED downturn after 2020 is characterised by persistently weaker performance across four LDI-related indicators: Election Free and Fair (v2elfrfair), Compliance with Judiciary (v2jucomp), Lower Court Independence (v2juncind), and Government Censorship Effort – Media (v2mecenefm).

The expert assessment highlights that democratic performance since 2020 has been affected by a convergence of internal and external factors, including the aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, authoritarian influences in neighbouring states, pandemic-related restrictions, and unresolved systemic weaknesses in democratic governance. While Armenia made notable gains following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, these improvements proved difficult to sustain during the subsequent period of political turbulence.

**The deterioration of electoral quality** has been a central factor (v2elfrfair). While the 2021 snap parliamentary elections were considered democratic overall, international observers noted a “highly polarised environment,” and subsequent expert assessments pointed to multiple deficiencies. These included the partial implementation of the Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, under-regulated campaign financing, and inconsistent application of electoral procedures. Despite the absence of widespread irregularities seen in past elections, the 2021 vote failed to reverse the decline in trust in the electoral process, particularly given the failure to address pre-existing structural weaknesses. Moreover, legislative gaps remained around the use of administrative resources, and provisions such as the ban on bi-national candidates and limited mechanisms for voters to challenge results were left unchanged (European Parliament et al., 2021; Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe [PACE], 2022; Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe [PACE], 2024).

**Judicial independence** has also weakened (v2juncind), particularly in the lower courts. While reforms following 2018 initially yielded improvement, they were not fully institutionalised. By 2022, experts noted that public confidence in the judiciary remained low due to perceived continued influence by actors linked to the former regime (i.e. the Serzh Sargsyan government). Many high-profile corruption or abuse-of-office cases involving former officials had stalled, reinforcing the impression of a lack of independence. The Ministry of Justice retained significant influence in disciplinary proceedings, recruitment, and administrative oversight of the courts, raising concerns about the executive's encroachment on judicial autonomy. Closely tied to this was a decline in **governmental compliance with judicial decisions** (v2jucomp). In addition, persistent gender

imbalances at all levels of the judiciary further undermined the inclusivity and credibility of the system (Freedom House, 2022; World Bank Group, 2023).

Finally, **media freedom** (v2mecenefm) also declined during the period, as reflected in growing government censorship efforts. Experts note that following the 2020 war, the government restricted civil liberties, introduced new censorship laws, and criminalised criticism of the government. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) criticised Armenia's excessive restrictions under martial law and pandemic-related emergency powers, including delayed responses to media inquiries and limitations on sources that could be cited (Doydoyan, 2020; Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe [PACE], 2022). Although the 2020 Law on Audiovisual Media introduced updated regulatory norms, it was criticised for vague provisions on emergency powers, licensing, and a lack of support for media self-regulation. Further deterioration followed the adoption of the 2023 Law on Electronic Communications, which expanded executive powers to block websites and censor content without meaningful institutional safeguards. (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023; Eurasianet, 2023; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2021).

### Georgia: Persistently Weaker Areas in ED Stability (2020-2022) and Following LDI Decline (2022-2023)

In the case of Georgia, the most recent regime state is the period of ED stability from 2020 to 2022. According to the expert input, this is largely explained by Electoral Management Body (EMB) Capacity (v2elembcap), Election Vote Buying (v2elvtobuy) and Freedom of Religion (v2clrelig).

With regard to **EMB capacity** (v2elembcap), the Central Election Commission (CEC) demonstrated the institutional ability to organise elections, manage voter registration and vote counting procedures, and publish results transparently (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021). This reflects progress made over the last two decades, marked by reforms in the early 2010s that introduced structural improvements, international best practices, and better training (EU Delegation to Georgia, 2020). However, despite this functional improvement, political pressure on the CEC leadership and lingering perceptions of bias remain unresolved (Transparency International Georgia, 2021). The gap between institutional performance and public trust continues to present a democratic vulnerability.

The generally strong EMB capacity during this period was accompanied by relatively low levels of **election vote buying** (v2elvtobuy), contributing to perceptions of procedural integrity. However, the practice was not entirely eliminated. Experts noted a sharp rise in vote-buying during the 2024 elections, marking a concerning reversal toward less democratic practices and reinforcing the declining LDI trend observed in Georgia since 2022.

**Freedom of religion** (v2clrelig) also exhibited relatively high average values during this period. Religion has long been a source of polarization in Georgia, largely due to the historic dominance of the Georgian Orthodox Church and resulting tensions with religious minority groups. The 2014 constitutional amendment, which officially acknowledged the Orthodox Church's "special role" in the country's history, further entrenched institutional inequalities affecting non-Orthodox communities. Nevertheless, the Georgian constitution formally protects religious freedom and recognises religious diversity. State institutions have generally refrained from imposing direct restrictions on religious practices, and legal protections for religious freedom remain in place (ECRI, 2018; Transparency International Georgia, 2021; Public Defender of Georgia, 2022).

However, experts noted that **lower court independence** (v2juncind) remained low throughout the period of ED stability, hindering further democratic consolidation and leaving Georgia vulnerable to regression. The independence of lower courts has long been a subject of concern in the country. While legal reforms have been introduced to strengthen judicial autonomy, particularly outside the higher courts, these efforts have produced limited results. The judiciary continues to face pressure from the executive, especially in politically sensitive cases, and persistent flaws 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).

Ultimately, while Georgia's ED stability between 2020 and 2022 was marked by strong performance in electoral and freedom of religion dimensions, experts highlighted the absence of sufficient institutional and judicial reform to sustain long-term democratic consolidation. As such, the identified concerns regarding EMB capacity, election vote buying, and lower court independence, alongside losses in **media diversity** (v2merange), increased repression of **civil society organisations** (CSOs) (v2csreprss), and greater dissemination of **government misinformation** (v2smgovdom), help explain the declining LDI trend observed in Georgia since 2022.

While Georgia's media landscape has historically been diverse, this **pluralism has increasingly come under strain** (v2merange) due to political polarisation and growing government influence. Despite some progress since the Rose Revolution, successive governments have exerted pressure on major broadcasters, contributing to a media environment in which outlets are more likely to align with political factions than serve as impartial sources of information (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021). This trend intensified in 2023 with the introduction of the controversial "foreign agents" bill. Though ultimately withdrawn following widespread protests and international condemnation – including from media watchdogs and EU institutions – the bill's proposal alone deepened societal divisions and exacerbated media polarisation. Outlets critical of the government faced growing regulatory and financial pressure, while pro-government voices consolidated control over key platforms, further narrowing the spectrum of public discourse. These developments have drawn concern from international observers, including The Times and The Guardian, who warned of their implications for Georgia's democratic trajectory and aspirations for EU integration (The Times, 2024).

Meanwhile, the introduction of the "foreign agents" bill revealed an increasing willingness by Georgian authorities to formalise **restrictions on civil society** (v2csreprss). Historically, CSOs in Georgia have played a crucial role in promoting democratic accountability, human rights, and good governance. The bill – modelled on legislation in more authoritarian contexts – sought to stigmatise foreign-funded organisations and impose disproportionate reporting obligations. Its proposal signalled a broader intent by the government to curtail civil society influence and reinforced ongoing trends of democratic backsliding (European Commission, 2023). The experts further highlighted that prominent watchdog groups and human rights organisations have come under pressure through selective investigations, while public vilification by ruling party officials and state-aligned media has become increasingly common. These developments stand in direct contradiction to Georgia's stated EU integration goals and risk undermining the foundations of participatory democracy.

Finally, the **dissemination of false or misleading information by government actors** (v2smgovdom) has emerged as a growing threat to Georgia's democratic trajectory. The experts note that the government's increasing use of disinformation – particularly since 2021 – has undermined public trust, distorted political discourse, and weakened institutional accountability. Historically used during times of political instability, the strategic manipulation of narratives has become more systematic, especially through government-linked media and social media platforms (Transparency International Georgia, 2021; OSCE/ODIHR, 2021). In 2023-2024, disinformation campaigns intensified around key issues such as judicial reform, elections, and foreign policy.

## Moldova: Persistently Weaker Areas in ED upturn (2019-2022) and following LDI Decline (2022-2023)

The ED upturn in Moldova between 2019 and 2022 is best explained by improvements in two key LDI indicators: Elections Free and Fair (v2elfrfair) and High Court Independence (v2juhcind).

In 2019, Moldova reversed the controversial shift to a mixed electoral system and returned to a proportional representation model. This move, prompted by widespread criticism from civil society and international actors, including the Venice Commission, aimed to address concerns about political manipulation and unequal representation. The 2020 presidential election, conducted under the challenging conditions of the

COVID-19 pandemic, was professionally administered and provided voters with a genuine choice. The European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO) deemed the process generally transparent and well-executed, although concerns remained regarding negative campaigning and vote-buying (ENEMO, 2021). The 2021 parliamentary elections were similarly assessed by international observers, including the OSCE, as competitive and well-run. However, the Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections noted persistent structural issues, such as weak enforcement of campaign finance rules and an uneven playing field. Despite these challenges, the reforms and institutional performance during this period marked a clear step forward in reinforcing **electoral integrity** (v2elfrfair).

The second indicator identified as explaining Moldova's ED upturn is **high court independence** (v2juhcind). The Constitutional Court of Moldova, as the highest constitutional authority, plays a central role in reviewing the legality of laws, government acts, international treaties, and political party activities. Although the Court is formally independent and directly accountable only to the Constitution, longstanding concerns about politicisation persist. These stem from the fact that four of its six judges are appointed by political institutions – two by Parliament and two by the Government – raising questions about political influence over judicial appointments. Despite these structural vulnerabilities, the Constitutional Court demonstrated a substantial degree of institutional independence during the 2019-2021 period. Its rulings had significant implications for Moldovan political life, including the validation of the February 2019 parliamentary elections and the landmark April 2021 decision to dissolve Parliament. These decisions reflected the Court's capacity to act autonomously in politically sensitive contexts, bolstering its institutional credibility and contributing to the broader democratic improvements observed during the ED upturn.

However, as in the case of Georgia, Moldova has experienced a notable decline in LDI since 2022, with experts identifying **judicial accountability** (v2juacct) as a key indicator explaining this reverse trajectory. The decline points to persistent structural shortcomings in the judiciary, despite the launch of ambitious reform efforts aimed at improving institutional integrity and accountability. Moldova's judicial sector has long suffered from a lack of accountability, with disciplinary action against corrupt judges historically rare and largely ineffective. Between 2014 and 2024, 77 judges were prosecuted, but none received prison sentences. In many cases, judges accused of misconduct were either not sanctioned at all or were reinstated after initial dismissals. A particularly high-profile case involved several judges implicated in the Russian "Laundromat" money laundering scheme who were reinstated in 2020 by the Superior Council of Magistracy (SCM) and even awarded four years' worth of back pay. This culture of impunity is reinforced by institutional structures in which judges are evaluated by their peers – who may themselves be vulnerable to similar allegations – creating disincentives to enforce meaningful disciplinary standards.

In 2022, Moldova launched an ambitious judicial reform process aimed at restoring public trust and strengthening accountability. A multi-tiered vetting mechanism was introduced to evaluate the integrity and ethics of judges and prosecutors. However, progress has been undermined by procedural delays and institutional gridlock. In March 2023, for example, the appointment of new SCM members was postponed due to a lack of quorum and complaints from unsuccessful candidates. As of 2024, the Supreme Court remained understaffed, requiring 15 additional judges to be fully operational. Meanwhile, no major disciplinary measures have been enforced against previously accused judges, and hearings in pending cases have often been indefinitely postponed.

Finally, the experts point to declines in government effectiveness, captured by several dimensions of LDI, including executive constraints, rule of law, and civil liberties. Historically, Moldova's public administration has suffered from politicisation, weak capacity, and systemic inefficiency. The lack of prior statehood, combined with decades of peripheral governance under external rule, left the country without a solid tradition of administrative professionalism or political culture. These structural deficiencies have been compounded by widespread brain drain, which continues to hollow out the civil service and limit the long-term viability of reforms. In the current context, the low effectiveness of governance not only undermines trust in pro-democratic and pro-European political forces but also fuels cynicism about democracy itself. Parties regularly rise to power on reformist platforms only to quickly lose credibility through mismanagement and ineffectiveness, reinforcing public disillusionment and weakening the prospects for stable democratic consolidation. The opposition, regardless of ideological orientation, often finds electoral success not through

persuasive alternatives but through the public's fatigue with governance failures. Moldovans increasingly view governmental incapacity as a primary obstacle to EU integration. As a result, the perceived ineffectiveness of pro-democratic forces poses a direct threat to Moldova's democratic future.

These intertwined weaknesses in judicial accountability and broader governance capacity have significantly undermined Moldova's democratic trajectory in the post-2022 period. The persistence of impunity and institutional inefficiency has not only stalled reform momentum but has also contributed directly to the LDI decline, reflecting both deteriorating liberal guarantees and weakening democratic performance.

### Ukraine: Persistently Weaker Areas in EA stasis (2020-2021) and LDI Gain (2022-2023)

According to the expert input, Ukraine's recent regime trajectory, characterised by EA stasis in 2020-2021 and LDI gain in 2022-2023, can be best understood through the evolution of four key indicators: the Appointment of the Cabinet by the Head of State (v2exdfcbhs), Executive Respect for the Constitution (v2exrescon), High Court Independence (v2juhcind), and Executive Oversight (v2lgotovst).

Although Ukraine's post-Euromaidan constitution adheres to a premier-presidential model, the 2020-2021 stasis period revealed how **presidential dominance continued to shape cabinet composition** (v2exdfcbhs). President Zelensky's Servant of the People party controlled a parliamentary majority following the 2019 elections, but, according to the experts, the MPs of this new political formation largely owed their success to Zelensky's personal popularity, lacking independent political bases. This dynamic rendered Prime Minister Shmyhal largely dependent on the President's goodwill, cementing executive dominance despite constitutional constraints (Sedelius et al., 2024). As such, Shmyhal's longevity in office – unprecedented in Ukraine's post-independence history – reflected alignment with the president's preferences and political outlook more than institutional strength

**Constitutional norms** were also selectively observed (v2exrescon). Zelensky launched an ambitious constitutional reform agenda after 2019, including bills to decentralize power, restrict parliamentary immunity, and expand citizen legislative rights (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2019a–d). However, several initiatives failed to gain parliamentary approval or were blocked by judicial review. His controversial 2019 dissolution of Parliament – executed with tenuous legal justification – highlighted the blurred boundaries between constitutional compliance and executive discretion. The onset of full-scale war in 2022 shelved most reform plans, but the institutional ambiguities exposed during 2020–2021 persisted.

**High court independence** (v2juhcind) was similarly fragile during this stasis period. The Constitutional Court of Ukraine (CCU) remained a focal point of politicization, its appointment mechanism split between the President, Parliament, and judiciary – a balance that has historically enabled political manipulation. In 2020, the CCU invalidated a key anti-corruption statute. Zelensky's response – declaring the ruling null and void, proposing to dissolve the court, and seeking to remove its Chair – exceeded constitutional bounds (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2020), yet failed to resolve structural deficiencies. In 2023, a new law diluted the independence of the body vetting CCU judges, contrary to Venice Commission advice (Venice Commission, 2022), raising renewed concerns about institutional capture.

Finally, the oversight landscape also stagnated during 2020–2021. Key anti-corruption agencies – National Bureau of Investigation (NABU), Specialized Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO), and Asset Recovery and Management Agency (ARMA) – suffered leadership vacancies and procedural delays, and broader institutions such as the State Audit Service and Prosecutor General's Office remained hampered by incomplete reform (Radio Svoboda, 2021; Prokip, 2020). The Ombudsman's Office made some gains in terms of capacity but remained underfunded and vulnerable to interference (Novicky & Tugushi, 2022). Civil society, though active, struggled to maintain oversight amid resource constraints.

Since 2022, however, Ukraine's receipt of EU candidate status and the start of pre-accession preparations have reinvigorated reform trajectories. European conditionality has driven key appointments at NABU and SAPO, and there has been a modest increase in high-profile prosecutions (Basel Institute of Governance, 2024; EUACI, 2025). These steps have been welcomed by civil society and EU observers alike. Nonetheless,

deep structural challenges remain, particularly as international funding - such as U.S. support through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) – has waned, threatening the sustainability of watchdog NGOs and investigative media.

## Policy Recommendations

### Armenia

In light of Armenia's recent democratic backsliding, the EU should recalibrate its engagement strategy to help reverse the emerging negative trends and consolidate democratic progress. While Armenia has made notable strides since the 2018 Velvet Revolution, the momentum has slowed, and key areas – particularly electoral integrity, judicial independence, and media freedom – remain vulnerable to institutional fragility and political pressure. To address these challenges, the EU should adopt a tailored and sustained approach. Assistance should focus on strengthening Armenia's reform capacities through close technical cooperation, structured political dialogue, and investment in institutional development. EU engagement should aim to empower credible reform actors, promote inclusive democratic practices, and rebuild public trust in core institutions.

At the domestic level, Armenia's **electoral reform process** must continue in a transparent and inclusive manner, with a particular focus on implementing the outstanding recommendations of the Venice Commission and the OSCE ODIHR. In line with ODIHR's Priority Recommendations, changes to the electoral legal framework should be made well in advance of elections and through an inclusive process. To ensure consistency and fairness, comprehensive legislative and regulatory frameworks should be developed to address the misuse of administrative resources, the financing of political parties, and the uniform application of electoral procedures nationwide. Specific recommendations that remain unimplemented – such as abolishing the ban on bi-nationals standing for election and enabling voters to challenge voting results in their constituencies – should also be addressed as part of the reform agenda. Moreover, political actors in Armenia must foster dialogue and constructive engagement with the opposition and civil society in order to protect the integrity of the electoral process. In particular, they should avoid excessive polarisation and the stigmatisation of political opponents, which continue to undermine trust in democratic institutions. Additional efforts are also needed to reduce gender inequality among parliamentary candidates, ensuring that electoral competition is both inclusive and representative.

To support these domestic efforts, the EU should deepen its cooperation with the Council of Europe and the OSCE ODIHR. Essential to the EU's democracy assistance in this area should be non-monetary forms, in line with research findings emphasising the importance of strengthening democratisation beyond financial aid (OECD, 2024). Instead, the EU should prioritise **capacity-strengthening initiatives for key stakeholders**, including the Central Electoral Commission, relevant government officials, political party representatives, civil society organisations, media actors, and legal professionals involved in the electoral process. These efforts should aim to enhance the technical and institutional foundations of Armenia's electoral system while fostering a more transparent and competitive democratic environment.

Moreover, to strengthen the rule of law in Armenia and reverse recent democratic backsliding, it is essential to reinforce guarantees of **judicial independence**, particularly within the lower courts. Domestically, a key institutional reform priority should be to reduce the influence of the executive branch over judicial recruitment and ensure that administrative practices within the judiciary do not undermine judicial autonomy. The judiciary itself must be granted a greater role in recruitment, promotion, and dismissal decisions, with a clear legal mechanism for contesting such decisions in court. Existing rules governing the transfer of judges should be revised to better safeguard judicial independence. Furthermore, safeguards must be introduced to ensure that disciplinary proceedings are not used as instruments of executive influence or retaliation, including reconsideration of the Ministry of Justice's role in such proceedings. In parallel, systemic protections should be established to prevent and mitigate undue interference with judges' work, particularly in the day-to-day administration of justice.

Domestic political actors also have a responsibility to uphold the dignity and independence of the judiciary. Publicly questioning judges' integrity as a collective body should be avoided, and symbolic commitments must be matched with practical steps, including improved remuneration for judges, particularly those serving in lower courts. Moreover, like in the case of the legislature, action is needed to address persistent gender imbalances at all levels of the judiciary through inclusive recruitment and promotion policies. EU support in this area should focus on tailored **capacity-strengthening initiatives for judges** – including those serving in general jurisdiction, administrative, anti-corruption, and bankruptcy courts – as well as for non-judicial staff and legal professionals. Training should cover judicial impartiality, ethics, and the prevention of corruption and conflicts of interest, aiming to bolster both individual capacity and institutional culture in support of judicial independence.

Moreover, an additional pillar of judicial reform involves ensuring full governmental compliance with judicial decisions. The progressive implementation of Armenia's Strategy for Judicial and Legal Reforms (2022–2026) provides a timely opportunity to enhance the effectiveness of the judiciary by institutionalising such compliance. Domestic actors should begin by conducting a comprehensive assessment of the enforcement of judicial decisions involving state authorities, especially in cases where the government is obligated to undertake specific actions or make payments. On this basis, a dedicated database of relevant court judgments should be established, and a national action plan introduced to improve compliance. This plan should be coupled with a system for the regular monitoring and evaluation of enforcement measures to ensure sustained progress. To support these efforts, the EU could fund the creation and maintenance of a publicly accessible database of all court rulings issued against the government that remain pending execution. Technical assistance could also be provided to analyse trends in non-compliance, with the aim of identifying systemic or recurrent issues. Finally, EU-funded capacity-building activities should be offered to relevant government institutions – particularly the Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor General's Office – to reinforce their ability to implement court decisions effectively and transparently.

Finally, **strengthening media freedom** in Armenia is a crucial step toward reversing recent democratic stagnation and promoting a more resilient democratic environment. Domestic institutional reform should begin with a comprehensive and inclusive overhaul of Armenia's media legislation, carried out in close cooperation with relevant European institutions. A particular priority is the review and possible amendment of the 2020 Law on Audiovisual Media to ensure that the legal framework governing media is fully aligned with European standards on freedom of expression and press independence. Domestic political actors must also play a constructive role in protecting and promoting media freedom. This includes advancing media and information literacy programmes, particularly those targeting vulnerable or underinformed segments of the population. Political actors should refrain from exerting undue influence on media outlets through opaque ownership structures, political affiliations, or manipulative licensing and authorisation practices. The safety of journalists must be safeguarded under all circumstances, and media self-regulation should be prioritised over restrictive state intervention. Where limitations on media activity are considered necessary, they must be implemented with strict adherence to the principles of necessity and proportionality, particularly in emergency contexts. In parallel, the EU should direct democracy assistance efforts toward supporting a free and pluralistic media environment in Armenia. Key priorities include promoting media and information literacy – especially among youth – providing financial and technical support to independent media outlets and fact-checking organisations, and conducting capacity-building activities for media professionals, including journalists, editors, bloggers, and fact-checkers. Additionally, EU support should extend to civil society actors and media initiatives aimed at countering disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech both online and offline. This includes offering resources and training for lawyers, human rights defenders, and IT specialists working to uphold media integrity and digital rights.

## Georgia

To reverse Georgia's recent democratic backsliding and restore progress toward EU integration, a comprehensive strategy is needed that reinforces institutional independence, safeguards pluralism, and rebuilds trust between the state and society. While Georgia has made important democratic strides over the past decade, recent developments in electoral integrity, media freedom, civil society space, and judicial

independence have raised growing concerns. In line with the European Commission's "9 steps" for democratic reform, the EU should adopt a conditional but constructive approach: one that combines political dialogue and technical support with clear expectations for credible reforms across key dimensions of governance.

Electoral integrity is central to Georgia's democratic recovery. For both EU policymakers and the Georgian government, **strengthening the capacity of the Electoral Management Body (EMB)** must remain a priority. This includes regular training for staff in areas such as election technology, cybersecurity, and conflict-sensitive management, alongside transparent budgeting procedures and independent financial audits. Enhancing civil society and political party engagement in electoral oversight would further improve public confidence. Moreover, reviving the inactive multi-party consultative platform could help depoliticise election administration and encourage cross-party collaboration. Additionally, vote buying must be tackled through stronger electoral monitoring, stricter enforcement of existing laws (including the simplified application of Article 164 of the Criminal Code), and robust protections for whistleblowers. Voter education campaigns should accompany these reforms, raising awareness about the corrosive impact of vote buying on democracy.

Political parties should take proactive steps to eliminate electoral bribery within their ranks, commit to clean campaigning, and ensure campaign financing is fully transparent. The EU should continue to provide long-term technical assistance to Georgia's electoral institutions and support the implementation of OSCE/ODIHR and Council of Europe recommendations through election observation and post-election follow-up. Capacity-building for local authorities and independent observers is essential to improve detection and accountability around electoral misconduct.

Furthermore, as highlighted previously, losses in media pluralism and the spread of government-led disinformation also threaten democratic norms. To counter these trends, Georgia should strengthen legal safeguards against the use of government-controlled platforms for disinformation while ensuring protections for free speech. Oversight and management of public broadcasters must be made more independent through transparent appointment procedures. Civil society and independent experts should be given formal roles in monitoring disinformation dynamics. Moreover, political leaders must commit to fact-based public discourse and initiate structured dialogue with media actors and CSOs to counter disinformation and promote media literacy. The EU should reinforce this process by **linking Georgia's accession progress to measurable improvements in media integrity and transparency**, as emphasised in the "9 steps." This includes financial and technical support for fact-checkers, watchdogs, and independent media – especially small and regional broadcasters. Collaboration between Georgian and EU-based media organisations can further promote professional standards and safeguard press freedom. The media sector's resilience also depends on reversing restrictive legislation. The definitive repeal of the "foreign agents" bill is essential, along with tighter regulations on media ownership to prevent undue political or economic control over major outlets. Parliament should revise public broadcasting legislation to eliminate partisan influence and protect editorial independence.

Equally urgent is the need to protect and empower civil society. CSOs are increasingly facing administrative harassment, public delegitimisation, and discriminatory legal frameworks. The government must restore legal safeguards for freedom of association and establish a formal strategy for structured dialogue with civil society. Political actors should refrain from rhetoric that undermines CSOs and institutionalise regular consultation mechanisms. The EU should **condition further integration steps on tangible improvements in the civil society environment**, as outlined in the "9 steps," and increase funding and capacity-building support for CSOs working on human rights, media literacy, and transparency, especially in underrepresented regions. EU-Georgia CSO partnerships should also be strengthened to shield local organisations from domestic pressures and expand their international reach.

Finally, meaningful **judicial reform** remains indispensable to restoring institutional checks and balances. The legal framework must be revised to ensure judicial appointments and removals follow transparent, depoliticised procedures, particularly within the lower courts. Strengthening the High Council of Justice's

oversight capacity through clearer conduct guidelines and stronger safeguards against external interference is also essential. Meanwhile, political actors must publicly support judicial independence and avoid rhetoric that undermines the judiciary. Civil society and legal professionals should be empowered to monitor judicial integrity and advocate for continued reforms.

The EU should maintain pressure on the Georgian government through **technical assistance**, **legal cooperation**, and **firm conditionality** within the accession process, providing a roadmap for reversing Georgia's democratic erosion and reaffirming its commitment to European values and institutions.

## Moldova

Reinforcing the **integrity of Moldova's electoral processes** is essential to reversing its recent democratic downturn and sustaining earlier gains in electoral quality and competitiveness. To this end, the EU should prioritise targeted technical assistance aimed at aligning Moldova's electoral system with international standards, including those articulated by the Venice Commission. Particular attention should be given to consolidating Moldova's fully proportional electoral system, which remains a critical safeguard against attempts by dominant political forces to capture institutions through electoral engineering. In parallel, the EU should adopt a more assertive stance by withholding broader forms of support should Moldova's political elites attempt to revive proposals – such as those advanced in 2017 – that seek to undermine the proportional system.

EU technical expertise should also be directed toward **reforming key electoral processes**, including voter registration, campaign finance transparency, and the impartiality of the Central Electoral Commission. These measures would help strengthen Moldova's electoral oversight framework and enhance public confidence in democratic competition. At the same time, **election observation** should continue to be a core pillar of EU engagement, in coordination with the OSCE and other international partners. Observers should focus not only on election-day procedures but also on pre-election dynamics and post-election accountability. Transparent monitoring of the voting and counting processes will be essential to preventing fraud, coercion, and manipulation. Crucially, the EU should use accession negotiations to press for the legal adoption and effective implementation of accountability mechanisms for political actors who seek to corrupt the electoral system. This should include considering the introduction of targeted sanctions against individuals who undermine electoral integrity, as well as against members of the judiciary who enable such actions by shielding political elites from prosecution or scrutiny.

Moreover, **safeguarding judicial independence** and ensuring meaningful accountability across Moldova's court system are essential to rebuilding public trust and sustaining Moldova's EU accession momentum. To this end, the EU should use accession negotiations to also demand the adoption of binding legal safeguards that shield Constitutional Court judges from political interference. This is especially urgent given past attempts – such as in June 2019 – by Constitutional Court judges acting on behalf of EU-sanctioned oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc to overturn legitimate election results and block government formation. The EU should consider targeted sanctions against judges implicated in such acts and ensure that these are publicly communicated in Moldova to reinforce the political costs of judicial complicity. A more systematic approach to transparency and public oversight is also needed. The EU should consider encouraging Moldova to publish regular (e.g., semi-annual) reports on the rulings and activities of the Constitutional and Supreme Courts, explicitly linking judicial decisions to the country's EU integration trajectory. These reports should be accessible to the general public in clear and comprehensible language, helping to demystify judicial processes and highlight systemic risks to judicial independence.

Judicial accountability must also be strengthened through structural reforms and institutional vetting. Moldova should be required, as part of its accession conditionality, to make judicial decisions and proceedings fully transparent in order to expose inconsistencies, biases, and conflicts of interest. The EU should play an even more active role in the ongoing vetting of judges and prosecutors, particularly in relation to Laws No. 65/2023 and No. 252/2023. This could involve, on the one hand, shaping the design of the vetting process and, on the other, expanding the proportion of vetting commission members nominated by

Moldova's international development partners, thereby further strengthening EU backing. Furthermore, recommendations such as those made in the European Commission's Moldova 2024 Report must be operationalised through clearer thresholds. For instance, the requirement to "ensure proactive and efficient anti-corruption investigations leading to a positive track record of prosecutions and convictions" (European Commission, 2024) should be delineated through measurable benchmarks to ensure implementation.

Finally, **improving Moldova's administrative capacity and overall governance effectiveness** remains a critical precondition for a return to a democratisation and EU accession trajectory. As such, during accession negotiations, the EU should strongly encourage Moldovan authorities to identify and eliminate redundant programs and bureaucratic overlap across government agencies, thereby reducing fiscal inefficiencies and improving operational coherence. A similar approach should be taken with regard to public sector human resources, encouraging legal reforms that make it easier to discipline or dismiss ineffective public officials. These should include enforceable accountability mechanisms without the possibility of judicial obstruction. Moldova should be encouraged to institutionalise annual grant schemes enabling civil society organisations and independent experts to assess government performance in key sectors. Findings from these initiatives should inform future governance reforms and provide early signals of emerging problems or opportunities. Public spending must also be reoriented to prioritise investments in technological modernisation, data management, and service delivery systems – rather than inefficient allocations toward short-term social transfers. Such steps are vital to consolidating Moldova's administrative resilience and aligning governance practices with European standards.

## Ukraine

With Ukraine demonstrating gains in LDI even amid the extraordinary conditions of warfare, the EU should, in support of democratic consolidation – particularly once the country returns to a peaceful state – **encourage institutional reforms** that reinforce the separation of powers between the presidency and the cabinet. In particular, constitutional amendments – such as revisions to Article 106 – should be pursued to clarify executive prerogatives and reduce informal presidential dominance. This should be complemented by support for improving the internal functioning of political parties, with the aim of strengthening links between voters, parliamentary coalitions, and the cabinet.

In parallel, civic education campaigns explaining the constitutional roles of the President and the cabinet would help foster public understanding and resilience against future attempts at institutional manipulation. Within its democracy support portfolio, the EU should apply more consistent **conditionality aimed at reinforcing checks and balances**. This includes strengthening cooperation with the cabinet rather than relying solely on presidential channels and using political dialogue forums to convey clearly that a return to the president-parliamentary model would be detrimental to EU-Ukraine relations and the broader accession process.

At the same time, stronger protections for constitutional order are essential to prevent executive overreach. The EU should **promote and support watchdog organizations** that monitor constitutional compliance and raise public awareness about violations. In addition, efforts should be made to encourage an inter-institutional agreement among the executive, legislature, and judiciary, rejecting politically motivated constitutional revisionism. These efforts can be reinforced through targeted EU leverage and linkage, using the accession process to insist on respect for constitutional norms. Continued support for civil society actors focused on legal oversight and transparency will be vital in safeguarding democratic accountability – especially in a post-conflict context, where institutional reconstruction will be key to a resilient democratic transition.

To further support democratic consolidation, the EU should also prioritise reforms that **reinforce judicial independence**. This includes sustained monitoring of judicial performance, and the implementation of measures aimed at enhancing institutional safeguards against political interference. Special attention should be given to addressing constitutional provisions that have facilitated judicial politicisation, which should be revised or nullified to ensure clearer separation of powers and remove presidential leverage over the courts.

At the same time, cooperation within the framework of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) should be deepened, with continued promotion of international oversight mechanisms such as the Advisory Group of Experts. In addition, EU-backed exchange programmes for young Ukrainian judges could help foster a professional culture of impartiality and embed European standards of judicial conduct.

Finally, regarding executive oversight, reforms should focus on strengthening the **institutional independence of key agencies** such as the State Audit Service and the Prosecutor General's Office. This entails reducing political influence through mechanisms like budgetary control and ensuring merit-based, transparent appointment procedures. Strategies must also be developed to complete long-overdue institutional reforms and create sustainable national-level funding mechanisms to support investigative media and civil society oversight organisations. As such, the EU should continue to apply clear and specific conditionalities related to the functioning of oversight bodies, ensuring consistent follow-up and addressing instances of selective compliance. Financial conditionality should be complemented by sector-level technical assistance and long-term capacity-building, allowing oversight institutions to meet both their core mandates and the additional demands of wartime governance and post-war reconstruction. In light of reduced U.S. assistance, particularly via USAID, the EU should also step up its support to watchdog NGOs and media initiatives, which play a critical role in upholding accountability and democratic resilience.

## Conclusions

Ultimately, employing a two-step approach to assess democratic challenges and formulate policy recommendations for Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine through the regime states framework offers an innovative and highly informative lens for policy analysis. While each country presents unique institutional challenges and trajectories, several cross-cutting patterns emerge, both in the indicators underpinning their current regime states and in the types of reforms most urgently needed to support democratic consolidation.

First, understanding regime states across the four cases reveals aggregate policy takeaways. Most notably, despite variance in context, all four countries exhibit significant fragility in judicial independence and electoral integrity – key indicators repeatedly flagged by country experts as driving either stasis or downturn.

Moreover, Armenia and Georgia represent cautionary cases of democratic backsliding, albeit for different reasons. Armenia's democratic opening after the 2018 Velvet Revolution has given way to a period of drift, where promising reforms have stalled amidst institutional resistance and uneven follow-through in the judicial and electoral domains. Georgia, by contrast, illustrates how politicised institutions and narrowing civil society space can swiftly reverse earlier progress. Both countries demand EU engagement that is simultaneously principled and flexible; leveraging accession incentives, technical assistance, and political pressure to revive reform momentum and rebuild public trust in democratic processes.

Moldova sits at a critical juncture, showing both potential and risk. While recent electoral and judicial reforms have created a more permissive context for democratic development, significant vulnerabilities remain. These include politicisation of the judiciary, weak public oversight, and limited administrative capacity. Moldova is a prime candidate for the EU to apply sharper, benchmark-based conditionality, especially through the accession process, while also investing in civil society and media ecosystems that can sustain public scrutiny and policy feedback.

Ukraine presents a paradox of democratic gains amidst wartime conditions. Its LDI improvement in 2022–2023 signals resilience, yet the underlying regime state remains marked by executive dominance, constitutional ambiguity, and underdeveloped oversight institutions. The EU's role here must be dual: to support institutional reforms in anticipation of a post-war reconstruction phase, and to apply meaningful conditionality that prevents wartime exceptionalism from consolidating into permanent presidential overreach.

Despite variation in regime state, a number of joint recommendations emerge. Across all four cases, the EU should strengthen oversight of institutions and judicial independence through targeted, long-term technical assistance. It should move beyond strictly financial support toward more strategic engagement, particularly in the areas of electoral reform, media integrity, and judicial accountability. Accession progress should be tied to the implementation of context-specific benchmarks, including those related to checks and balances and the depoliticisation of state institutions. Finally, the EU should invest in local watchdogs – civil society organisations, investigative media, and legal advocacy groups – that are essential for sustaining democratic resilience.

Ultimately, effective EU democracy support requires treating regime states as both context-dependent and temporally dynamic. Policymaking must be attuned to not only where a country is on the autocracy-democracy spectrum, but also to whether it is in a moment of opportunity or risk. By tailoring engagement strategies to these shifting realities, the EU can more effectively contribute to democratic consolidation across its Eastern Neighbourhood, anchoring reforms in local institutions while safeguarding progress against future reversals.

Finally, the ranking-based diagnostics presented here are meant to orient rather than conclude analysis. They signal where democratic quality is most at risk or improving, inviting further empirical testing and continuous monitoring through both quantitative and qualitative lenses.

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