



REDEMOS

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

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Design and communication of EU democracy support

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Executive Summary

This policy brief presents key findings from an original elite survey (N=61) of EU representatives in Brussels working on relations with its Eastern partner countries, that is Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Conducted between October 2024 and May 2025, the survey captures officials' assessments of the EU's external image in the region, as well as their preferences regarding democracy promotion instruments and engagement with Eastern counterparts.

The findings show that EU officials' instrument choices are shaped not only by assessments of what works on the ground, but also by how they believe the EU itself is perceived by their counterparts in the partner countries. While support for transactional, incentive-based tools (e.g., financial and technical assistance, high-level visits, election monitoring, and membership-related incentives) remains consistently high across respondents, support for declaratory instruments (e.g., public statements or thematic conferences) declines markedly among officials who believe the EU is seen as a constrained and less credible actor.

The results highlight the importance of reflexive, perception-aware diplomacy and point to concrete ways to strengthen the acceptance, credibility, and effectiveness of EU democracy promotion in the Eastern partner countries. Practically, this means that strengthening EU democracy promotion requires pairing public signaling more systematically with visible follow-through, prioritising incentive-based engagement where credibility is fragile, and improving internal coordination so that EU messages and actions reinforce rather than undermine each other.

In a nutshell

This policy paper examines how EU officials' perceptions of how the EU is viewed in Eastern partner countries shape their preferences for democracy-promotion instruments. Using a large survey of EU representatives working on the region, it shows that democracy support is not only driven by assessments of "what works," but also by reflexive judgments about EU credibility, legitimacy, and influence.



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List of acronyms and abbreviations

EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union

How perceptions shape EU democracy promotion

What shapes EU representatives' preferences for democracy-promotion instruments in the eastern neighbourhood? Our survey shows that EU representatives' choices are not driven only by assessments of what works on the ground, but also by how they believe the EU itself is viewed by their counterparts in the region. In other words, EU diplomacy is reflexive: EU officials and members of parliament adjust their preferred tools based on their perceptions of EU credibility, legitimacy, and influence in partner countries.

The eastern neighbourhood is a particularly revealing context for examining this dynamic. EU representatives generally see the region as receptive to engagement and interested in cooperation with the EU, yet also as skeptical about the Union's coherence, consistency, and political clout. This combination of openness and doubt creates a setting in which EU representatives constantly balance ambition with caution.

Two dominant perceptions of the EU's external image

EU representatives cluster around two broad understandings of how they believe the EU to be viewed by their counterparts:

- **EU as a credible normative power:** Representatives in this group believe that partners largely see the EU as a principled and constructive actor, supporting civil society, promoting multilateralism, offering humanitarian assistance, respecting local cultures, and contributing to political stabilisation.
- **EU as a constrained external actor:** Representatives in this group believe the EU is seen as a constrained external actor, lacking leverage, coherence, and credibility. From this perspective, the EU is perceived as slow, inconsistent, overly bureaucratic, and insufficiently influential in shaping outcomes.

These contrasting perceptions matter because they shape what EU representatives consider appropriate and effective forms of external engagement.

Two logics of democracy-promotion instruments

Across the survey, EU representatives distinguish between two broad categories of tools:

- **Transactional instruments** are widely viewed as practical ways to encourage reforms and maintain engagement. They rely on material benefits, conditionality, or concrete exchanges, such as high-level visits, financial and technical assistance, election monitoring, prospect of EU membership and intermediate steps, and diplomatic sanctions (e.g. suspending contacts, withdrawing experts).
- **Declaratory instruments** are tools seen as ways of communicating norms, expectations, and political stances. They primarily signal positions or values rather than offer material exchange and consist of declarations or statements expressing the EU's position, sponsoring thematic conferences, as well as visa facilitation incentives or promises.

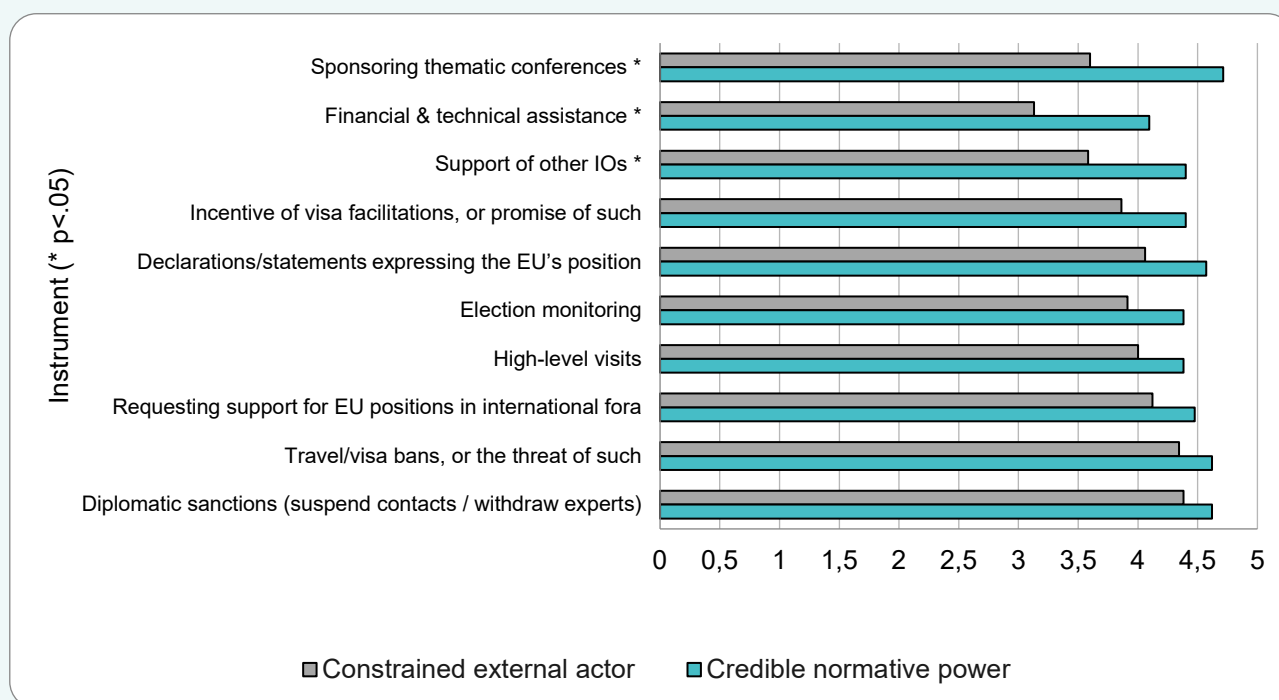
Put simply, transactional tools change incentives, while declaratory tools shape narratives.

Key findings

Our findings suggest that EU democracy promotion is shaped by a feedback loop between perceived image and chosen instruments. If officials believe the EU is seen as constrained external actor, they may avoid speaking out, potentially reinforcing perceptions that the EU lacks leadership.

Figure 1 illustrates that perceptions of a constrained EU are associated with systematically lower support for declaratory instruments, while support for transactional tools remains high across both views of the EU's external image. The largest differences between perception groups appear for declaratory instruments such as sponsoring thematic conferences and public statements, whereas support for transactional tools like financial assistance, high-level visits, and election monitoring remains high and comparatively similar across groups. This suggests that increasing reliance on declaratory tools without parallel investments in credibility is unlikely to improve outcomes.

Fig. 1: Support for EU Democracy-Promotion Instruments by Perceived External Image



Bars show average support (0–5 scale) among EU representatives who believe the EU is seen as a credible normative power versus a constrained external actor. * indicates statistically significant group differences ($p < .05$); $N = 59$.

Taken together, the findings show that EU representatives' preferences for democracy promotion instruments are shaped by how they believe the EU is perceived by their counterparts in the Eastern partner countries. Four patterns stand out that show the direct implications of perceptions for daily EU external action:

1. Broad consensus on transactional tools

Across perception groups, EU representatives strongly and consistently support transactional, incentive-based instruments. Material assistance, high-level visits, election monitoring, and membership-related incentives are widely viewed as indispensable for encouraging reforms and sustaining engagement.

2. Perceptions mainly affect declaratory instruments

By contrast, support for declaratory instruments—such as public statements or thematic conferences—varies substantially. Officials who believe the EU is seen as a constrained and less credible actor are significantly less supportive of these tools.

3. Reputational caution shapes choices

When officials fear that the EU lacks legitimacy or influence, they gravitate toward instruments that deliver tangible, transactional effects rather than those that primarily signal values. Declaratory tools are considered useful mainly when the EU is believed to be taken seriously by partners.

4. Different priorities, not different goals

Importantly, divergences in preferences for diplomatic instruments concern *how* to promote democracy, not *whether* to do so. Across perception groups, EU representatives continue to endorse democracy promotion as a core objective; they differ chiefly in their preferred modes of engagement.

Policy recommendations

Beyond instrument preferences, the survey asked about crisis drivers of cooperation, civil society inclusion, and perceptions of external actors, each relevant to how the EU's credibility is built or undermined. Together, these insights suggest that effective democracy promotion in the eastern neighbourhood requires not only a diverse toolbox of policies but also sustained attention to how EU actions are perceived and interpreted.

1. Embed perception-awareness into EU external action

EEAS geographic desks and Commission services should systematically assess how the Union's credibility and legitimacy are perceived by their counterparts in partner countries before deploying highly visible declaratory instruments. Where the EU is widely seen as constrained or inconsistent, declaratory tools should be carefully calibrated and paired with tangible follow-up actions to avoid reinforcing skepticism.

2. Prioritise transactional engagement while safeguarding normative signaling

Incentive-based instruments (e.g., financial and technical assistance, high-level visits, election monitoring, and membership-related steps) should remain the backbone of democracy promotion. At the same time, public statements and thematic diplomacy should be used strategically, focusing on moments where the EU can credibly demonstrate consistency and commitment.

3. Strengthen internal coherence and coordination

Closer coordination between the European Commission, EEAS, and European Parliament is essential to ensure consistent messaging and avoid mixed signals. Shared guidance on when and how to combine transactional and declaratory tools can reduce fragmentation and enhance the EU's overall credibility.

4. Deepen and broaden civil society engagement

EU institutions should move beyond ad hoc consultation and establish more structured, predictable channels for engaging civil society organisations. Improving access to information, publishing clear summaries of EU-funded projects, and offering multilingual documentation can enhance transparency and local ownership.

5. Invest in communication and counter-disinformation capacities

Strategic communication should focus on clearly linking EU support to concrete benefits for citizens in partner countries. Strengthening capacities to monitor and counter disinformation, particularly from actors seeking to undermine trust in the EU, remains essential.

6. Develop hybrid crisis-response toolkits

In periods of acute political or security crisis, the EU should deploy integrated packages that combine assistance, monitoring, diplomatic engagement, and targeted pressure. Such hybrid toolkits can preserve channels of cooperation while maintaining normative commitments.

Why this matters

Simply increasing the number of public statements or conferences without parallel investments in credibility and follow-through is unlikely to improve democracy outcomes. Instrument choice must be aware of perceptions.

Technical Details

Study

Online elite survey on EU representatives' perceptions of democracy promotion instruments and the EU's external image in the eastern neighbourhood.

Target Population

EU officials and representatives from key EU institutions working on democracy support and external relations with eastern neighbourhood countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine).

Sample

59 EU representatives | Identified population: 553 EU representatives | Response rate : 10.67%

Institutional distribution of identified population | sample:

European Commission (N = 174 | 27)

European External Action Service – EEAS (N = 110 | 9)

European Parliament (N = 244 | 9)

European Council (N = 25 | 14)

Fieldwork Period

29 October 2024 – 09 April 2025

Languages

English, French, and German

Data Collection

Online survey administered via a newly developed open-access, open-source platform integrating restricted choice sorting (Q-sorting). Purposive sampling with multi-channel recruitment (cold emails, reminders, phone outreach, targeted institutional engagement).




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Towards a sustained demos in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood**

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