



# REDEMOS

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

## Policy Brief 4

# Transatlantic Influence: How the United States Shapes Political Change in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood

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## Setting the Scene

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the United States viewed the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) as a strategic buffer between Euro-Atlantic institutions and Russia, linking democratic governance, energy security, and conflict mitigation as mutually reinforcing priorities. Democratic breakthroughs in EN became key moments when U.S. assistance—through organisations like USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)—strengthened civil society, electoral processes, and institutional reforms. Engagement grew deeper after Russia’s attacks on Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014, 2022), with successive U.S. administrations increasingly identifying Russia as a systemic threat. The 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy explicitly framed the EN as a frontline in the global contest between democracy and authoritarianism. Yet, U.S. involvement has ultimately become less consistent. Authoritarian resilience in Belarus and Azerbaijan, democratic backsliding in Georgia, and shifting U.S. foreign policy priorities—especially the retreat from democracy promotion during Trump’s second term—reduced strategic coherence. As a result, the effectiveness of U.S. assistance has been highly context-dependent. Research similarly finds no uniform democratising effect, but rather “pockets of impact,” especially in civil society development, electoral reform, and judicial strengthening. Georgia and Armenia illustrate how targeted support can catalyse democratic openings, while Ukraine and Moldova show that progress is possible but constrained by war or state capture. Conversely, in Belarus and Azerbaijan, entrenched autocracy has largely neutralised U.S. influence, limiting assistance to small-scale civil society and media support without systemic change. Overall, U.S. assistance has been most effective where domestic reform coalitions and political pluralism allow external support to be embedded. However, recent backsliding—even in previously successful cases—demonstrates the fragility of democratic gains.

This policy brief therefore asks how U.S. engagement can become more coherent and resilient, shifting from crisis-driven responses to sustained efforts that strengthen institutions, protect civil society, and reduce vulnerabilities to authoritarian influence, while aligning more closely with EU priorities and ongoing transatlantic initiatives.

## Key Findings

- **U.S. assistance has been uneven but strategically significant**, with Ukraine and Georgia historically receiving the highest volumes due to their geopolitical position and reform potential. Armenia and Moldova have benefited from more targeted support, while Belarus and Azerbaijan remain highly constrained environments.
- **Successive U.S. National Security Strategies increasingly view the EN through the lens of great-power competition.** Russia is consistently seen as a destabilising actor; China emerges as a significant external competitor, especially in technology, infrastructure, and governance models.
- **U.S. democracy assistance is most effective in semi-open political systems**, where civil society, independent media, and political pluralism exist and can meaningfully absorb external support.
- **Autocratic resistance sharply limits the impact of U.S. assistance.** In Belarus and Azerbaijan, restrictive legal frameworks, repression, and state hostility have neutralised most democracy-promotion efforts.
- **U.S. support follows “windows of opportunity.”** Funding spikes after democratic breakthroughs (Georgia 2003, Ukraine 2014, Armenia 2018) but tends to decline when reforms stagnate or backsliding occurs.
- **A major strategic shift under Trump’s second term** has reoriented U.S. assistance away from democracy promotion toward security, great-power competition, and burden-shifting to Europe. This risks reducing U.S. leverage on governance reforms across the EN.
- **Civil society resilience remains the strongest legacy of long-term U.S. support, especially in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova, where decades of aid continue to foster reform coalitions and watchdog functions.**

## Policy Recommendations

- **Reaffirm U.S. strategic commitment to the EN as a cornerstone of European security:** The EN is central to wider Euro-Atlantic stability. Reinvesting in democracy assistance—particularly in Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia—reinforces institutional resilience against Russian and Chinese influence. U.S. policy should explicitly link stability to democratic governance and rule of law.
- **Prioritise flexible, long-term democracy support tailored to political context:** Assistance must respond to varying levels of political openness. In semi-open systems, the U.S. should increase support for independent media, judicial reform, anti-corruption efforts, decentralisation, and watchdog NGOs. In closed regimes, support must focus on exile-based civil society, digital security, and independent information channels.
- **Strengthen coordination with the EU and avoid parallel, fragmented democracy-support tracks:** Given Europe’s geographic and political proximity, U.S.–EU alignment is essential. Joint programming, co-funding, and shared messaging would help mitigate authoritarian pushback and increase pressure on backsliding governments.
- **Reinforce resilience against authoritarian influence from Russia and China:** Support should expand in areas such as cybersecurity, disinformation resilience, and protection of political institutions. The U.S. should also deepen scrutiny of Chinese surveillance technologies and infrastructural investments that undermine transparency and civic freedoms.
- **Reward democratic progress—and respond swiftly to backsliding:** Introduce clearer conditionality: enhanced support for reforms, and reductions, redirection, or freezes in response to democratic erosion. The recent reassessment of assistance to Georgia demonstrates the leverage Washington retains when conditionality is credible.
- **Invest in long-term civil society and youth engagement:** Sustainable democracy requires generational renewal. Increased support for civic education, youth leadership programs, investigative journalism, and local governance strengthens the societal foundations of democratic resilience across the EN.
- **Restoring institutional capacities should be integrated into future U.S. foreign policy priorities:** The downsizing of USAID and other instruments risks weakening U.S. influence precisely when democratic fragility is increasing. Restoring institutional capacities should be integrated into U.S. foreign policy planning for the EN.

The full study – [REDEMOS Policy Paper: The role of the United States in the political transition of the EU's eastern neighbourhood](#) – can be found at [Policy Papers – REDEMOS](#)



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

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