



REDEMOS

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

Policy Brief

Contested Democracy Narratives in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood: Implications for EU Policy

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Setting the Scene

The EU's eastern neighbourhood has become a central arena of contestation between liberal-democratic and authoritarian models of order. The EU, together with like-minded partners, seeks to support democratisation, rule of law and human rights in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. At the same time, Russia and, to a lesser extent, China, promote alternative visions of political order that challenge the EU's claim to normative leadership and its capacity to act as a credible security and development partner.

Over the past decade, Russia has increasingly framed liberal democracy as a civilisational threat, portraying Western support for democratic movements as a form of geopolitical warfare. These narratives are not simply external propaganda; they are co-produced with local actors and entangled with domestic grievances, identity conflicts and security dilemmas. In this sense, FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) is less an exogenous shock than a set of discursive resources that domestic elites can mobilise to legitimise authoritarian consolidation, slow-rolling reforms or selective alignment with Moscow.

China's presence in the information space of the eastern neighbourhood is more limited, yet its performance-based, development-centred narrative provides an important reference point for governments and publics that are disillusioned with the slow, conditional and sometimes inconsistent nature of Western democracy support. In Georgia in particular, Chinese messaging intersects with domestic debates on economic dependence, infrastructure and diversification, offering a "third way" that does not demand liberal reforms.

Key Findings

- **Russia deploys four overarching narratives** that directly and indirectly contest liberal democracy and European integration: (1) *"Decadent and declining West"*; (2) *"Historical unity with Russia"*; (3) *"Russia provides security, the West stokes conflict"*; and (4) *"Western-imposed democracy"*. These frames systematically present the EU and the broader West as morally corrupt, politically hypocritical, strategically aggressive, and culturally alien to societies in the eastern neighbourhood.
- **Chinese narratives are less polarising but still subtly erode the appeal of liberal democracy** China advances a single, comparatively softer meta-narrative of **"China as a positive alternative"**, emphasising economic pragmatism, non-interference and development, while implicitly questioning the universality and effectiveness of the Western democratic model. Its narrative presence is weaker than Russia's in most countries, but has become notably more visible in Georgia as bilateral ties deepen.
- **Domestic political and socio-cultural conditions crucially shape the reception of external narratives.** Russian frames are actively reproduced in Belarusian state-controlled media and political discourse, but strongly contested and deconstructed in Ukraine; other countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova) occupy intermediate positions, with selective amplification, adaptation, or rejection of specific narratives.
- **Security narratives recast democracy support as a threat.** In multiple cases, Russia is portrayed as a guarantor of order and stability, while the EU, NATO and the US are framed as destabilising actors that provoke war, colour revolutions, or the loss of territorial integrity. Democracy movements, electoral protests and EU-linked reforms are recoded as Western-engineered subversion rather than expressions of local agency.
- **Religion and morality constitute central battlegrounds.** Russian narratives systematically frame the EU and broader West as morally decadent and hostile to "traditional values", with LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality used as symbols of moral decline. These frames are amplified through segments of Orthodox Churches and conservative actors in Moldova, Georgia and Armenia, but are increasingly contested by pro-European political and civic elites.

Policy Recommendations

For EU policymakers, the key challenge is thus twofold. First, to **recognise that narratives contesting democracy are not abstract discourses**, but **structuring forces that shape how citizens interpret crises**, protest, integration and war. Second, to **design democracy support, enlargement and neighbourhood policies** that neither underestimate the reach of authoritarian messaging nor inadvertently reinforce it – for example, by allowing democracy assistance to be framed as foreign interference or by decoupling political reform from concrete improvements in security and welfare.

Based on the comparative analysis of Russian and Chinese narratives in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, REDEMOS proposes the following policy directions for the EU and its member states:

- To counter the persistent external framing that portrays liberal democracy as incompatible with national stability, the EU should more visibly position itself **as a security provider rather than solely a promoter of norms and reforms**. Democracy support must therefore be **closely tied to tangible security outcomes**: investments in cyber-resilience, border protection, defence collaboration, critical infrastructure and civil preparedness. Communicating these linkages directly to local publics and political elites can help dismantle the narrative that the EU and NATO “import instability”, instead highlighting **that democratisation and closer alignment with Europe deliver enhanced protection and collective resilience**.
- Anti-democratic narratives continue to find fertile ground where **socio-economic grievances remain unaddressed**, especially in frontline regions affected by war, displacement and economic dislocation. The EU should ensure that the **practical, daily benefits of European integration**—quality jobs, reliable services, fairer governance, restored infrastructure—are visible and measurable. By making accession and democracy reforms **explicitly connected to improved livelihoods and social justice**, the EU can reduce the credibility of claims that Western engagement leads to inequality, corruption or dependency, strengthening trust in both European institutions and domestic reformers.
- Russia’s instrumentalisation of “traditional values” frames the EU as a civilisational threat, particularly in Orthodox-majority societies. Rather than avoiding these sensitive cultural arenas, the EU should **engage constructively with conservative and religious actors** who hold genuine societal influence, **while firmly upholding fundamental rights**. Reframing equality and rights protection in terms of **dignity, family security and freedom from coercion** can reduce polarisation and blunt the effectiveness of authoritarian culture-war narratives, without diluting the EU’s normative commitments.
- EU must **tailor its approaches to distinct domestic configurations** across the eastern neighbourhood. In Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, European support should **integrate democratic reforms with security assistance and clear accession pathways**. In more authoritarian or hybrid contexts such as Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan, **people-centred engagement** through education, mobility, independent journalism and community development can sustain democratic constituencies while reducing opportunities for regimes to frame EU action as destabilising. **Differentiated, context-sensitive delivery** will strengthen democratic resilience by aligning EU support with the incentives, identities and vulnerabilities that shape local political realities.

The full study – **Narratives of external norm contenders across the EU’s eastern neighbourhood** – can be found at <https://redemos.eu/resources/publications/working-papers/>



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

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