



# REDEMOS

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

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## **Stocktaking of EU democracy support towards the eastern neighbourhood**

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## Executive Summary

This working paper provides an overview and critical analysis of European Union (EU) democracy support actions towards the eastern neighbourhood. It puts a particular emphasis on the period since the commencement of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009 up until the beginning of the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. In doing so, the paper provides a comprehensive mapping as well as critical analysis of EU's democracy support activities in the eastern neighbourhood over time. It takes stock of the challenges and opportunities, seeing the factors contributing to success or failures and reflecting on the recommendations that can be made to address the inefficiencies of the past with a view to tackling the challenges of the future.

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# 1 Introduction

In the years following the collapse of the Iron Curtain, many countries of the former Eastern Bloc and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) initiated processes of democratisation. Communist regimes were collapsing one behind the other, and the power vacuum created from the previous establishment had to be filled quickly. Beyond the processes of political transition (Welsh 1994), a set of parallel processes of economic transition commenced either through shock therapy or gradual reforms that led to the early formation of liberal capitalist-oriented economies (Sachs 1993; Sachs and Lipton 1990).

There were three sets of countries emerging within these processes: (a) sovereign central and eastern European countries; (b) former soviet republics who had gained their self-determination in the west of Russia and in the Caucasus; and (c) a commonwealth of independent states in the Asian territories of the Soviet Union. Of course, more processes of sovereignty took place (such as the split of Czechoslovakia and the independence of the Baltic states) including ones that ended in bitter and bloody conflicts (such as the break-up of Yugoslavia) or a set of and frozen conflicts between Russian rule and domestic control (Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia among others) (Dahrendorf 2017; Rupnik 1997).

The start of economic liberalism coupled with processes of regime change created an environment of deep overhauling of previous civic and economic practices but equally led to the emergence of new economic and political elites who replaced the old guard, frequently misappropriating power or seizing economic assets in an oligarchic way. At the same time a number of international players showed an interest in these newly emerging economies and regimes, including of course Russia, the United States, Turkey, China and without a doubt, the then European Economic Community. In fact, for some of these former Iron Curtain countries key partnerships with the West formed a tool of foreign policy and most importantly, a tool of detachment from the Russian influence with an outlook to westernization and reintegration into the European continent.

However, the European Union has not offered all these countries the same prospects in terms of their relationship with it. One group of countries has been advanced to membership through the enlargement process, with membership linked to conditions of democratization and the rule-of-law and working with them to align their national frameworks with the *acquis communautaire*. Another group of countries has been advanced to association and closer cooperation without the prospect of membership, with associations or partnerships loosely linked to democratization. Finally, a third group of countries was left out of any such associations but created only loose partnerships based on trade and economic collaborations. As a result, the emphasis on democracy support has varied based on the relationship these countries built with the EU. At the same time the EU instruments have also evolved as the EU itself changed priorities and as part of the wider geopolitical circumstances, including Russia's role in the region.

In this context, the countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood are the object of special attention and interest of the European Union. Relations and cooperation with these countries have gone through a long, complex and ambiguous path. Specific strategies, policy instruments and mechanisms have been developed to promote processes of democracy support in the Eastern Partnership countries. Therefore, while the EU has pursued regional policies towards its Eastern neighbourhood, it has also worked bilaterally or between some of these countries to support democratic action within these developed strategies. The challenges of supporting democracy in the Eastern Partnership countries from a regional perspective are conditioned by their diverse international and regional integration processes. Thus, the three Eastern Partnership countries, Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine have demonstrated their willingness and readiness to further deepen cooperation with the EU and, by signing the Association Agreement (European Commission 2014) and joining the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, also to become part of the EU economic system. Already in 2022, the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova.

The purpose of this working paper is to provide a comprehensive and critical analysis of the EU's democracy support activities in the eastern neighbourhood over the last few decades, and to provide background

information on the EU's democracy support activities in the region. It provides key concepts to democracy support and analyses the evolution of the EU's democracy support activities in the eastern neighbourhood commenting on their effectiveness and impact over time, identifying the main challenges and opportunities for improving their effectiveness and providing recommendations to address these challenges. It further dissects the principles of the EU's good governance agenda, and further links them to theories of democratisation. The overarching aim is therefore to contribute to a better understanding of the EU's democracy support efforts in the eastern neighbourhood and to inform policy discussions on how to improve their effectiveness.

As this working paper shows, the EU has the widest range of relationships with actors in the Eastern Neighbourhood and has successfully mastered the full range of possible ways of interacting with these countries. It is possible that the cooperation mechanisms developed will be in demand outside the EU at the global level. However, this region is characterized by an unprecedented density of various multilateral institutions through which interaction is carried out. As the European Union, and with it the idea of a single European home, is at a new stage in its development, it is characterized by the presence of a certain tension and imbalance in conditions of war and no peace. As a result, the EU space is fragmented and heterogeneous. While the EU's agenda to promote democracy promotion via the good governance principles is laudable and has been supported by the EU's own actors and partners, the effectiveness of this agenda has been questioned.

The working paper proceeds as follows: the next section establishes definitions and concepts and the role of EU institutions in democracy promotion in the EaP context. The Fourth Section provides an overview of EU democracy support actions towards the Eastern Neighbourhood. Subsequently, a critical analysis of various key benchmarks, the general effectiveness and consistency of democracy promotion efforts, as well as main challenges are presented. The following chapter lays out a SWOT analysis of the EU's actions in the EaP region. The Seventh Section briefly presents and discusses selected case countries. This working paper ends with an executive conclusion.

## 2 DEMOCRACY SUPPORT AND GOVERNANCE REFORMS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR EU POLICY IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

### 2.1 Background of the European Neighbourhood Policy in Supporting Democracy

Since its founding, the EU has declared democracy to be an essential component of the pan-European political identity and system of social values on which domestic and foreign policy and security are built. Having been legally enshrined in the EU's founding treaties, democracy has evolved from a value to a supranational interest, advancing the global European security agenda. After the 'big bang' enlargement in 2004, the European Union, on the one hand, had the opportunity to promote the idea of a 'Wider Europe', and on the other hand, it was faced with new threats of instability and uncertainty emanating from the eastern and southern neighbourhoods. To take advantage of the benefits of enlargement and address the challenges posed by its immediate neighbourhood, the EU launched the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), focusing on supporting transition processes and democratisation in partner countries. Privileged relations with new partners within the ENP were designed to be built on common values, mainly in the areas of the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights, the promotion of good neighbourly relations, and the principles of a market economy and sustainable development. In other words, in its relations with the wider world, the European Union sought to preserve and promote the common values of the pluralistic societies of its Member States by providing support, including technical assistance and twinning, to comply with EU norms and standards (European Commission 2004, 6-12).

As both the term democracy and the concept of democracy support were not defined and were used in the context of demonstrating EU assistance in extremely broad and comprehensive areas, there was a need to provide some clarity and prevent misinterpretations. From this perspective, the EU Agenda for Action on Democracy Support in EU External Relations made the EU's efforts to promote democracy more coherent. In its conclusions, the Council confirmed that the development and consolidation of democracy and the rule of law is one of the objectives of the EU's external action, and opened the toolkit for supporting democracy (also known as dialogue instruments): policies, action under EU human rights guidelines, financial instruments, election observation missions, Common Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) missions, and action in multilateral fora. Moreover, for the first time, the Council clearly defined its values, norms, and core principles in democracy support — ensuring democracy as the only regime for the realisation of human rights; good governance and democratisation progress as a prerequisite for sustainable development; promotion of gender equality; support to actors involved in electoral processes; accountability of leaders; the active participation of all stakeholders in the development of the state and the building of democracy, including non-governmental organisations and non-state actors (Council of the European Union 2009, 1-4).

### 2.2 Democracy Support in EaP Countries within the Framework of ENP

Since its creation in 2004, the ENP has launched several important initiatives, but it was only the achievement of the Lisbon Treaty that allowed the EU to expand cooperation with neighbouring countries to cover the full range of issues in an integrated and more effective manner. In practice, such opportunities for the EU were created by the establishment of two regional dimensions: the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Given these new realities and the importance of building and consolidating healthy democracies, sustainable economic growth, and managing cross-border connections, the EU sought to adopt an approach that would allow the ENP to become a catalyst of change, supporting democratic developments in the wider neighbourhood based on a shared commitment to universal values. This new incentive-based approach, known both among European bureaucrats and the academic community as the principle of 'more for more', aimed to strengthen the regional dimensions, including the Eastern Partnership, by providing

greater support to partners engaged in building ‘deep and sustainable democracy’ through appropriate mechanisms and instruments (EED and CSF). By ‘support of deep democracy’, the EU meant the unconditional provision of political rights and civil liberties: free and fair elections; freedom of association, expression, assembly, and a free press and media. Moreover, this included the rule of law administered by an independent judiciary and the right to a fair trial. It also incorporated the fight against corruption, the reform of the security and law enforcement sector (including the police), as well as the establishment of democratic control over armed and security forces (European Commission & High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2011, 1-3).

From the very beginning, the EU recognised that the implementation of all these elements of deep democracy required a strong and lasting commitment on the part of governments. Regarding the policy of strengthening the Eastern Partnership, the EU planned to liberalise the visa regime, sign association agreements, deepen parliamentary and public cooperation within the framework of EURONEST and EaP Civil Society Forum, and strive for democratisation. What is particularly noteworthy here is that in the case of EaP, the ‘deep and sustainable democracy’ approach is identified with democratisation, with greater emphasis on the participation of civil society and social partners, since the main objective of the ENP was and remains the creation of a ‘ring’ of well-governed countries aimed at institution building, political reforms, and good governance. It is therefore not at all surprising that, in accordance with the study of International IDEA, the EU’s priorities regarding its eastern partners often lack specificity, especially in the area of democratisation, where terms such as ‘democratisation’, ‘good governance’ and ‘institution-building’ are often used interchangeably (International IDEA 2016, 3). However, it would not be wrong to claim that democratisation is a hyponym and includes all concepts associated with democratic change.

Just four years after the 2011 Revised ENP, a new process to review the ENP strategy was initiated. The 2015 EaP Summit in Riga, whose central theme was institution-building and good governance, had a significant impact on the Review of the ENP. To stabilise and strengthen the neighbourhood, the EU eventually reached a consensus that partnerships should focus on fewer priorities, with an emphasis on a higher level of differentiation and shared responsibilities of Member States in the ENP. It is noteworthy that in the new ENP, on the one hand, accountable public administration of central and local authorities is of particular importance as a key priority in democratic governance, and, on the other hand, providing support to citizens aimed at holding governments accountable (European Commission & High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2015, 3-6).

## 2.3 The Role of EU Institutions in Democracy Support

Almost all of the EU’s principal decision-making bodies — the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council of the European Union, and the European Commission — seek to make a major contribution to the protection of human rights and the promotion of democracy. The European Commission, to start with, supports democracy mainly through the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and thematic programmes. The NDICI includes all EU foreign policy assistance instruments. Moreover, the thematic programme Human Rights and Democracy, which is a component of NDICI, essentially continues the mission of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), launched in 2007. While all of these instruments imply financial support for democracy and good governance, they would not be successful if the EU did not demonstrate the political will to invest fundamental human rights values in the development activities of partner countries. In this respect, the conclusions adopted by the Council of the EU in 2014 are of key importance. The Council of the European Union (2014), welcoming the Commission’s Toolbox on the human rights-based approach (HRBA), declared democracy and good governance, on the one hand, and inclusiveness and sustainable growth, on the other, as pillars of the EU’s development policy, stressing that political dialogue with all partner countries is a key element of the implementation of the HRBA for development cooperation. The updated 2021 Toolbox places the rights holders at the centre of the EU’s Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation, setting out five working principles of the HRBA that are consistent with the objectives of EU external action: applying all human rights for all; meaningful and inclusive participation and access to decision-making; non-

discrimination and equality; accountability and rule of law for all; and transparency and access to information supported by disaggregated data (European Commission 2021, 8).

In close cooperation with the other EU institutions, the European Parliament (EP) has developed and successfully applies its own tools to support democracy. Having become a dedicated and active defender of democracy both within and outside the EU, the European Parliament has put its vision of democracy support on an institutional basis. Since 2014, the EP has expanded its activities to strengthen institutional capacity and support democracy through inter-parliamentary dialogue and mediation, with a particular focus on the Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood (Zamfir 2021, 9). In this regard, the consensus-building process, known as the Jean Monnet Dialogues, deserves special attention. As part of this soft tool, the EP held 9 dialogues with the Ukrainian parliament (VRU) in the period 2015-2023. Through this tool, the European Parliament directly influences the preparation of legislative initiatives of the partner country and establishes peer-to-peer contacts, gaining not only a 'distinct advantage' among other parliamentary support providers but also a 'competitive advantage' in terms of political perspective and democracy support (Ruthrauff, Collier, and Roberts 2019, 32-66). However, there is concern that peer-to-peer support is perhaps more visible between European national parliaments and the VRU, than between the EP and the VRU (International IDEA 2022, 20).

Another important tool is the Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG), headed by the chairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Development, which plays a crucial role in reinforcing parliamentary democracy and the parliaments' institutional capacity in non-EU countries, as well as in monitoring the entire electoral cycle, beginning with the pre-election period and continuing after the vote. Establishing an ongoing dialogue with parliaments of non-EU countries and striving to make them fully-fledged members of the democratic community, the EP implements support programmes for MPs and civil servants, such as conferences, seminars, workshops, study visits, and fellowship programmes, which typically have a common goal: exchange and localisation of EU best practices. These initiatives are critical because they have a direct and long-term impact in terms of voter representation, law-making, and control of government.

Since 2014, the DEG has adopted a 'comprehensive democracy support approach' (CDSA) to monitor the entire electoral processes, targeting not only political parties and MPs but also civil servants and politically active civil society organisations. A key feature of this innovative approach was that the need to develop democracy support activities was driven by both election observation and 'strategic interventions around the electoral cycle'. Moreover, thanks to this approach, it became possible to link election observation with other support activities of the European Parliament (Ruthrauff, Collier, and Roberts 2019, 11-13). In addition to capacity building, another important aspect of CDSA is political leadership, as in order to increase the political ownership of democracy support, one MEP is appointed as 'lead member' for the priority country (e.g., Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia from the EaP countries), making the EP activities more visible. Furthermore, since the EP wants to make CSOs partners in democracy support, it not only promotes dialogue between government and non-state actors but also encourages investigative journalism and freedom of information. In this way, the European Parliament makes democracy support initiatives inclusive, since in the case of freedom of the press, media consumers involved in the fight against fake news and disinformation become, to some degree, part of the democracy support.

The EU also works closely with the Council of Europe, developing joint initiatives and common measures to promote human rights and democracy as well as to strengthen good governance in the EaP region. The Partnership for Good Governance (PGG) programme, launched in 2014, is particularly important as the EU supports the EaP beneficiary countries on five themes (Zamfir and Klis 2018, 4) aimed at strengthening justice, countering economic crime, promoting equality and non-discrimination, advancing women's access to justice, and combating violence against women to implement domestic reforms in accordance with European standards (European Union and Council of Europe 2023).

## 2.4 EU Global Strategy as a New Understanding of the ENP

The new strategy adopted in 2016 has radically changed the security priorities of the EU, affecting its external action, in particular the ENP. This is explained by the fact that the geopolitical shifts that influenced the change in strategy unfolded within the ‘ring of friends’ of the EaP. Several circumstances in the EU Global Strategy deserve attention. First, the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods are no longer a periphery, but an intermediate zone, which means that the range of challenges to the vital interests of the EU has narrowed significantly. Second, the concept of ‘resilience of states and societies’ is introduced, aimed at strengthening the post-traumatic recovery of both society and the state as a collective institution in the neighbourhood and surrounding regions. Third, the EU strongly supports different ways of building resilience in the east and south but focuses only on the most acute aspects of fragility and targets those where meaningful change can be achieved (European External Action Service 2016, 23-25). The revolutionary significance of the idea of resilience of states and societies lies in the fact that it emphasises the need to eliminate contradictions between the ruling elite and society. This approach moves the EU away from the grip of the state-society dichotomy and, more importantly, it focuses on promoting the institutional resilience of the neighbouring countries, viewing the partners’ internal resources as the key to success.

## 2.5 Good Governance as a Priority for the Future Policy Strategy in the EaP: The Conceptual Approaches

The priorities of external action and the dramatic change in approaches included in the EU Global Strategy as well as the adoption of the common reform agenda titled ‘20 Deliverables for 2020’ have had a great impact on the policy of the Eastern Partnership in a short time. In 2020, the Commission and the VP/HR released a joint communication, consisting of five long-term policy objectives for future cooperation. The first one is ‘a partnership that creates’. There, ‘the EU and the partner countries [commit to] work together towards resilient, sustainable and integrated economies. The second objective is a ‘partnership that protects’. Under it, ‘the EU and partner countries will renew their commitment to the fundamentals of the partnership, in particular to accountable institutions, the rule of law and security’. In practice, this foresees reforms of the judiciary, of the public administration, in the anti-corruption realm, as well as in the security domain (European Commission & High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2021, 5-8). The third priority is ‘a partnership that greens’, meaning that ‘the EU and partner countries will work together towards a resilient and sustainable future’. Fourthly, the communique envisions ‘a partnership that connects [as] the EU will invest further in the digital transformation of partner countries and will aim to extend the benefits of the digital single market’. Lastly, ‘a partnership that empowers’ is supposed to be developed in which ‘the EU and partner countries will work together towards resilient, fair and inclusive societies’ (European Commission & High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2020, 4).

Whilst policy objectives number two and five indirectly relate to democracy promotion, the Joint Communique mentions democracy only as subpoint 3 of the fifth policy objective. There, it also only refers to the EU’s commitment in ‘supporting the efforts of partner countries in conducting credible, inclusive and transparent elections’ as well as very generally speaking of ‘fostering political pluralism’ (European Commission & High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2021, 14). As such, the agenda itself does not contain measures directly applicable to the establishment, consolidation, and growth of democracy, but focuses on a final outcome without precise instruments to achieve this state and milestones on the way. Instead, it contains parameters that are frequently found within democratic theory as being centrepieces of democracy promotion.

With respect to its mechanisms, the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all (2020) explicitly lays out the conditionality mechanism as a key provision of the second policy objective. The EU states that ‘progress in rule of law reforms [will be considered] when deciding on assistance’. Further, the EU also commits itself to ‘proposing ways to better measure the impact

of judicial reforms'. This is in close relation to the general provision of the 'incentive- and conditionality-based approach [...] of the European Neighbourhood Policy as established in the EU Council Conclusions of December 2015, as a means to encourage Eastern partner countries to engage in reform and to continue to increase efforts in this regard' (Council of the European Union 2020, 3). The above-mentioned approaches are consistent with the concept and theory of external governance, which scholars employ to assess EU democracy promotion in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; Börzel, Pamuk, Stahn 2008; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009; Börzel and Schimmelfennig 2017).

This agenda is additionally guided by four principles that are in line with the good governance and better regulation agenda that formed part of the EU's ENP. Europeanization, that is, the 'the institutionalisation of EU rules at the domestic level - for instance, the transposition of EU law into domestic law [and] the restructuring of domestic institutions according to EU rules' Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005, 7) has even been described as 'the oldest and most comprehensive attempt to encourage good governance' (Mungiu-Pippidi 2019, 66). Good governance is generally defined as a 'situation where the dominant rule of the game in government ethos and practice is ethical universalism – the norm according to which everyone is treated equally and fairly, and following which if universal welfare proves inaccessible, the outcome must be that the broadest possible social welfare is achieved' (Mungiu-Pippidi 2019, 27). Further, official EU publications themselves have separated good governance into its components of 'effective' and 'democratic' governance, whereas the former denotes the 'efficient and effective functioning of the state' and the latter 'democratic structures [...] as key components of good governance' (Hackenesch 2016, 12). Hence, the argument does, by promoting good governance with all its components, democracy is simultaneously promoted as the latter is included in the former, not least visible by having political stability as one of the key components of the WGI. On the other hand, however, a two-way relationship and feedback mechanism becomes visible, as democracy is demonstrated to have a positive impact on good governance in turn.

These four principles that underpin good governance for the EU are openness, participation accountability, and effectiveness. Openness denotes 'institutions [that] work in a more open manner, [that] communicate [and use an] accessible language, [which] improves confidence in complex institutions. Participation, on the other hand, symbolises 'wide participation throughout the policy chain, from conception to implementation'. 'Improved participation', it is argued, 'creates more confidence in the end result and in the Institutions which deliver policies'. In this context, it is said that 'participation crucially depends on central governments following an inclusive approach'. The third principle, accountability, describes the need for 'roles in the legislative and executive processes to be clearer', effectively bringing about 'clarity and responsibility'. Lastly, the principle of effectiveness is put forward, which means that 'policies must be effective and timely, delivering what is needed on the basis of clear objectives, an evaluation of future impact, and, where available, of past experience, [as well as according to the idea of] proportionality' (European Commission 2001, 7-8).

For a more comprehensive understanding and assessment of effectiveness, the paper also addresses issues of coherence in EU foreign policy. Although existing scholarly work is inconclusive regarding the relationship between coherence and effectiveness, many scholars state that 'greater political coherence will make the European Union a more effective international actor' and that coherence may be a causal condition for effectiveness (Thomas 2012, 457). The Commission also emphasises the coherence of EU foreign policy as a necessary precondition for effectiveness (European Commission 2006, 2-3). Coherence is a concept that not only refers to the absence of contradictions, but also considers the "production of synergy" (Portela, Kolja 2009, 3). Meanwhile the literature on EU foreign policy suggests that cohesion and consistency can be viewed as two necessary dimensions of coherence, since the latter is the capacity of the EU to develop and carry out cohesive and consistent policies. Cohesiveness is an EU's ability to formulate internally and represent externally a commonly agreed policy while consistency indicates that EU policies in one sphere should not undermine policies in other directions (sectoral consistency) or the extent to which the EU's approach to the EaP countries in the democracy promotion congruent over a certain period of time (temporal consistency) (Conceição-Heldt & Meunier 2014).

In the framework of this paper, the concepts of 'coherence' and 'effectiveness' refers to the degree of EU's success mainly observed in terms of its external relations or foreign policy goals and objectives in the Eastern neighbourhood. More specifically, it aims to demonstrate to what extent an Eastern neighbour has advanced its democratisation (governance mechanisms, the rule of law, improvement of human rights record, etc.). In this sense, for example, Börzel and Van Hüllen (2017) show how the lack of EU's internal cohesiveness and goal inconsistency have contributed to the lack of external effectiveness in shaping outcomes of international negotiations regarding the democratic changes in EU's neighbourhood.

In addition, it is also worth noting that the European Commission, along with openness, participation, accountability, and efficiency, also views coherence as principles that together form the basis of good governance (European Commission 2001, 7-8). According to the Commission, these principles generally underpin democracy as well as the rule of law in the Member States and apply to all levels of government. This is outlined in Article 205 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union:

The Union's action on the international scene, pursuant to this Part, shall be guided by the principles, pursue the objectives and be conducted in accordance with the general provisions laid down in Chapter 1 of Title V of the Treaty on European Union.

Chapter 1 of Title V of the Treaty stipulates in its first paragraph that:

"The Union shall constitute an area of freedom, security and justice with respect for fundamental rights and the different legal systems and traditions of the Member States."

That is, the global, European, national, regional and local levels are all guided by these principles of freedom, security and justice with respect for fundamental rights. This, naturally, also includes the EaP level. Therefore, the persistence by the EU to apply the principles of its own good governance agenda, which are inspired by the OECD better regulation programme, in relation to this region is linked to the general democracy promotion approach within the EU's foreign policy tools. Noticeably, in the 2020 Joint Communiqué, institutional reforms are often characterised by leading to outcomes closely resembling these good governance principles. For instance, in the previously introduced second pillar, judicial reforms are meant to bring about 'more transparent, independent, accountable, efficient and professional delivery of justice' (European Commission & High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2021, 5). Similarly, under this pillar, the public administration is meant to be accountable, transparent and efficient. When referring to anti-corruption reforms under this pillar, the communiqué again characterises expected outcomes as one that 'ensure[s] the transparency, independence, effectiveness, integrity and accountability of these institutional frameworks'. Also in the fifth pillar, the first paragraph focuses on the goal to create an 'enabling environment for civil society', which will further 'help to promote inclusive democratic reform and public accountability'. These good governance principles therefore represent cross-cutting characterizations of outcomes in many key spheres.

Based on the EU's principles of good governance, openness, participation, accountability, and effectiveness are selected as key measures. These principles are also mapped out on the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) for Voice and Accountability, Control of Corruption, Rule of Law and Government Effectiveness that the World Bank has developed, making a comparative analysis more feasible (Kaufmann, Kraayand, and Mastruzzi 2010, 4). The development of the six countries of the EaP with respect to these indicators and their achievement of democracy based on V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) will be traced. As a result, the meaning and progress of good governance as an overarching regional goal can be revealed. Beyond that, the connections to the outcomes of democracy will also be distilled.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF EU DEMOCRACY SUPPORT ACTIONS TOWARDS THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

In 2004, because of the greatest enlargement in the history of the European Union, the security policy of new external borders and strategic communication with new neighbours were fundamentally revised. On the one hand, in an effort to avoid dividing lines, and on the other hand, to guarantee the sustainable development of the single market and values based on a common civilisation, the European Union reformulated its foreign policy, perceiving the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as an instrument of common policy that was to be implemented within the framework of two initiatives: the Eastern Partnership (EaP, countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus) and the Union for the Mediterranean (countries of North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean). These two initiatives, which are, in fact, the regional dimensions of the European Union's foreign policy, were significantly affected by both the 'Arab Spring' in the Middle East and the socio-political changes that had taken place in Eastern Europe.

#### 3.1 Outlining Instruments and procedures

In assessing the procedural methods by which the EU seeks to promote its objectives in relation to the neighbouring countries in the east, a distinction can be made between policy instruments (Hood 1983 and Salamon 2002) and policy procedures (Radaelli and Meuwese 2010). The former refers to the type of instruments used to foster designated outcomes, including regulatory, financial, informational, and organizational instruments. The latter denotes the design, the strategy, management, monitoring and quality assurance of these policies (Exadaktylos 2012).

With respect to the policy design, that is, the question of who is in charge and under what conditions, as well as the strategic management question, that is, who is responsible for implementation and who is held accountable, the clear ownership of reforms held by the partner country is constantly stressed in official documents. For instance, in its Joint Communique on the Beyond 2020 EaP Strategy, the European Council 'highlights the ownership of the reforms by the Eastern partner countries' (Council of the European Union 2020, 3). However, it further stresses the importance of 'joint monitoring of the reform progress' (Council of the European Union 2020, 3). Through this, it designates shared competencies in oversight and quality assurance between the partner country and the EU. For this, the communique denotes the 'importance of establishing clearer guidance on specific reform priorities, with objective, precise, detailed, [and] verifiable benchmarks' (Council of the European Union 2020, 3). The EU's role in this process does not only limit itself to the monitoring process, but further extends to 'supporting all implementation efforts, including via adequate financial and expert assistance' (Council of the European Union 2020, 3). As such, the EU takes nominally a supportive role in financial and non-financial terms whilst leaving the factual implementation of reforms to the partner country. This shows that next to financial policy instruments also non-financial are available. Table 1 below provides an overview of these instruments:

	<b>Enforcing</b> ( <u>Positive conditionality</u> vs. <i>Negative conditionality</i> )	<b>Inducing</b>
<b>Economic</b>	<u>Macrofinancial Assistance</u> <u>Market access</u> <i>Financial sanctions</i>	Budget and project support (grants and loans)
<b>Political</b>	<u>Visa facilitation</u> <i>Personal sanctions</i>	Political dialogue Technical support and capacity building Twinning

		Taixex Mobility partnerships
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**Table 1: Categorization and Conceptualization of EU Democracy Promotion Instruments. Own Presentation.**

With respect to instruments, one can generally distinguish between instruments with an enforcing and inducing nature. This is the broadest distinction which can also be found under the notion of ‘leverage’ versus ‘linkage’ or top-down and bottom-up approaches in the literature (Levitsky and Way, 2006). It is worth noting that ‘the instruments used by the EU to promote democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and “good governance” look surprisingly similar across the globe’, which allows the conclusion that ‘the EU follows quite clearly a specific cultural script’ (Börzel and Risse 2004, 2). The former set of instruments are characterised by ‘[a] mechanism [that] concerns diffusion of ideas through the manipulation of utility calculations by providing negative and positive incentives’ (Börzel and Risse 2009, 10). This ‘manipulation’ can broadly be equated with conditionality in the EU context, as for the compliance with potentially painful reforms, hence reforms that would normally not be pursued, a financial or non-financial reward is given. A similar definition for this category includes ‘the logic of consequences’ or EU-driven (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005). In this approach, the EU seeks to change the internal incentive structure of governments by using either positive or negative as well as financial or political instruments, as presented in the table. It is worth noting that coercion, in which ‘actors may simply have no choice but to accept an idea because they are forced by the threat or the actual use of physical violence’ is ‘often overlooked in the literature’ (Börzel and Risse 2009, 10). However, due to the EU’s nature as a normative and economic power, this instrument does not bear relevance for the evaluated context of this study.

The other category of instruments can be seen as domestic-driven efforts of democracy promotion, which is also found as the ‘logic of appropriateness’ in the literature (see Schimmelfennig, 2015) or as ‘socialisation’ and ‘persuasion’ (Börzel and Risse 2005, 10-11). According to this approach, ‘target states are persuaded to adopt EU rules if they consider these rules legitimate and identify with the EU’, which can happen ‘through intergovernmental interactions (bargaining or persuasion) or through transnational processes via societal actors within the target state’ (Schimmelfennig 2015, 7). As with enforcing measures, these include financial and non-financial instruments. It is worth noting the difference between manipulation of incentive structures that enforcing instruments are characterised by and persuasion that describes inducive ones.

The creation of the ENP represented a formal paradigm change with respect to enforcing instruments. This is because it was the first initiative for the Eastern European neighbourhood countries without an immediate accession perspective that foresaw ‘economic integration in return for concrete progress in terms of legal approximation’ (Van der Loo et al. 2014, 4). Hence, the first occurrence of the conditionality mechanism appeared, where the execution of reforms was bound to supposed, financial rewards. At its core, the ENP operated through so-called Action Plans (APs). These were bilaterally negotiated agreements consisting ‘of an extensive list of measures that ENP states [were] required to fulfil in order to benefit from closer (but underspecified) integration with the EU’ (Wolczuk 2009, 189). As these APs were individually negotiated with each ENP country, a certain differentiation in terms of these plans took place, depending on local priorities and political interests. As such, broad policy procedures within the EaP remain set, but the actual pursuit of various priorities and, through this, the availability of various policy instruments to the partner countries varies.

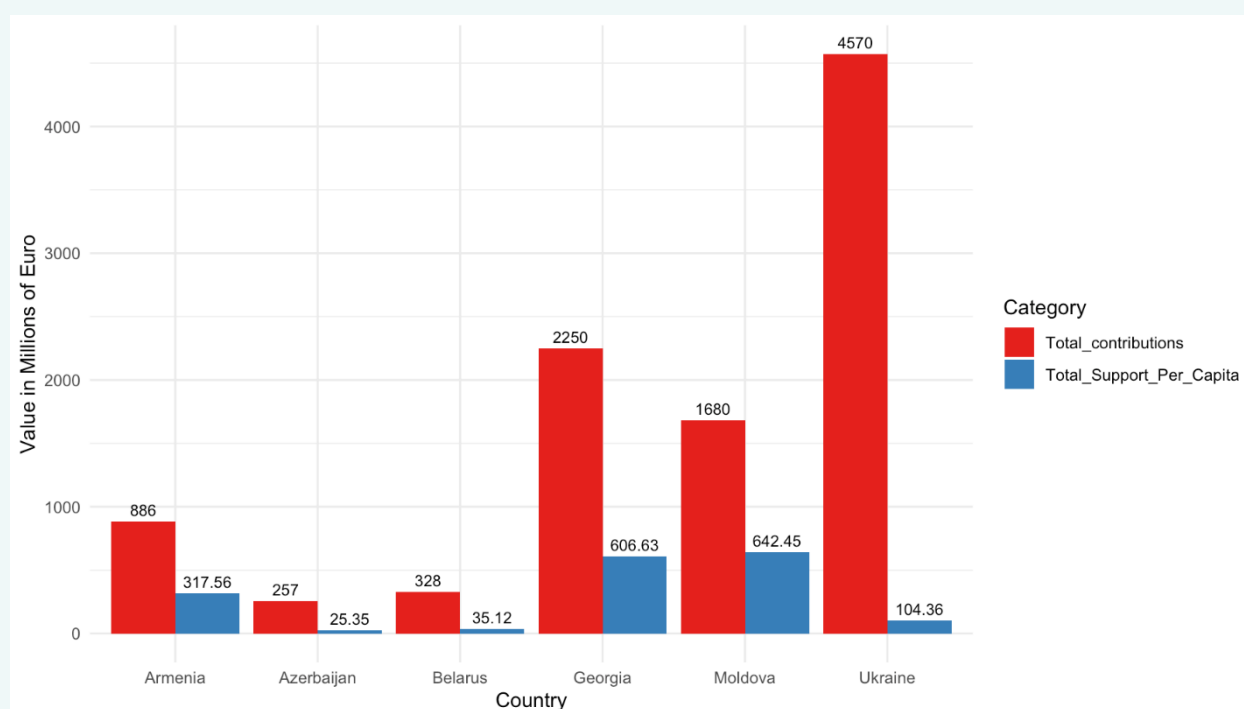
From 2007 onwards, further differentiation took place with respect to countries voicing the need for a more ambitious partnership with the EU. Ukraine became in that year the first country to start the negotiations on an Association Agreement, which would foresee an as close integration between Kyiv and Brussels as possible, just falling short of an actual accession. The Association Agreements, which were subsequently signed with Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, operated according to the ‘anything but institutions’ (Prodi 2002) paradigm, meaning close integration with but not into the European Union. Nevertheless, this alleviated status came along with additional opportunities for financial as well as non-financial inducive and enforcing aid.

As such, not just economic integration was given for normative compliance but also financial support more generally. As Article 453 of the Agreement between Ukraine and the EU stipulates: ‘Ukraine shall benefit from financial assistance through the relevant EU funding mechanisms and instruments. Such financial assistance will contribute to achieving the objectives of this Agreement’. Article 455 further specifies that ‘priority areas of the EU financial assistance agreed by the Parties shall be laid down in relevant indicative programmes reflecting agreed policy priorities.’

## 3.2 Financial Instruments

### 3.2.1 Inducive

Focusing first on induce aid, relevant data can be gathered through official sources. This is, for one, the EU aid explorer, which allows to approximate the inducive EU funding. It includes anything classified as gross official development assistance (ODA), which covers ‘monetary transfers (e.g., grants and loans to governments and projects), non-monetary transfers (e.g. food aid, technical cooperation) and support that did not contain any additional transfer of resources (e.g. debt relief)’ (European Commission, n.d.). It therefore broadly mirrors the classification introduced above. The EU aid explorer data also includes a comprehensive overview of actions down to the individual project level. Its limitation is the difficulty to correctly map the data as it does not separately classify democracy promotion actions. Focusing first, however, on the total inducive EU aid to the EaP countries, the following picture is retrieved:



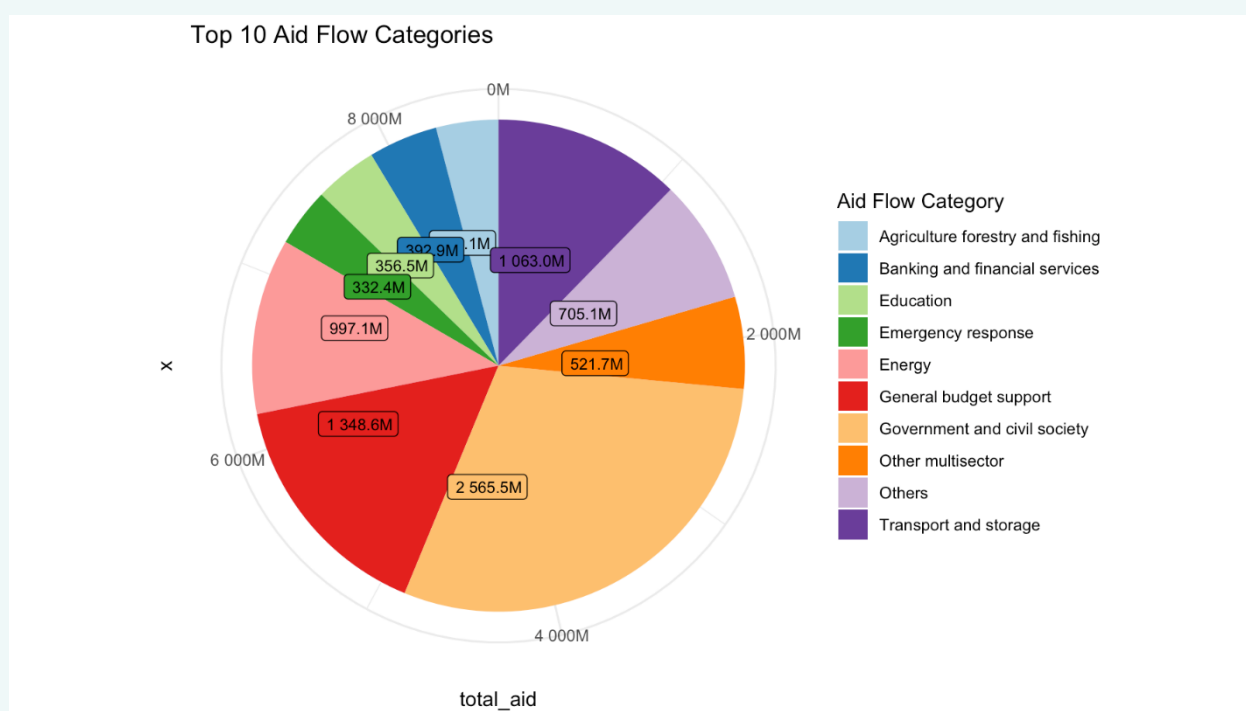
**Figure 1: Overview of EU inducive financial flows to the EaP between 2009 and 2021 in absolute and per capita measures. Own presentation based on European Commission data.**

Ukraine is in this respect a clear outlier country as compared to its status as an association country. That is because, according to this classification, only about 104 Euro have been spent in all the years between 2007 and 2021 for inducive democracy support measures in Ukraine, yielding less than 10 Euro per year per capita. The three-times higher level of support to Armenia, and six-times higher level for Georgia as well as Moldova are noteworthy findings. The very low level of per-capita, inducive support for Belarus and Azerbaijan, two countries without any deeper relationship with the EU, is, however, hardly surprising. The per-capita support

by inducive instruments therefore broadly corresponds to the levels of institutional and foreign policy proximity to the EU that these countries exhibit.

It is worth noting that at times, most of inducive funds are almost exclusively channelled to the civil society as opposed to the government. For instance, following the crackdown on the pro-democracy protests in Belarus in 2020, the EU Foreign Affairs Council adopted new Conclusions on Belarus on October 12, 2020 (European Council 2020). By these Conclusions, the EU's approaches to Belarus have been revised, and financial assistance to Belarus was accordingly reformatted and directed bypassing the authorities to the Belarusian society. As a result, since August 2020, the total amount of support provided to the people of Belarus from the European Commission exceeds 100 million euros. The support package, adopted in November 2020, amounts to 25 million euros and consists of two components: support for Belarusian civil society organizations and support for students and professionals through the continuation of the scholarship program (EEAS 2022).

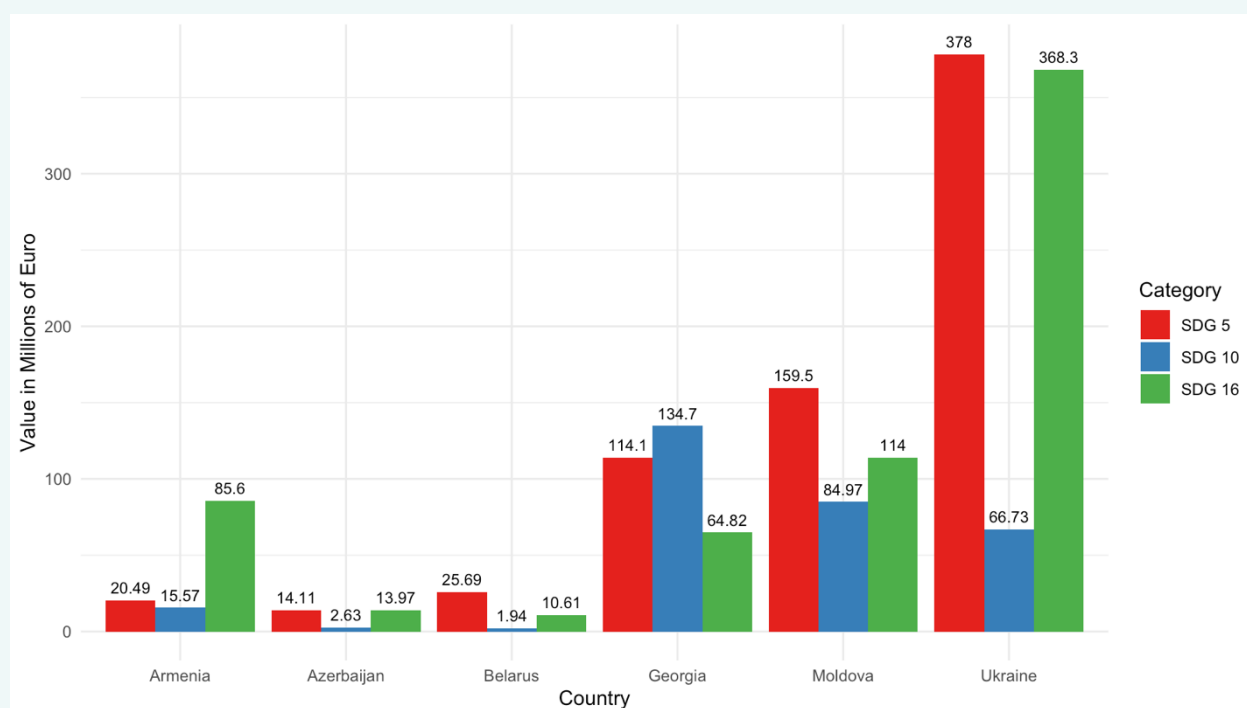
Going beyond the total aid numbers, approximating a figure for democracy aid is a challenging task. This is because, as it has been noted in the literature, 'figures are not easily available, democracy aid is mixed in confusing ways with other funding (such as for public administration reform or peace-building), and aid categories are not directly comparable across countries' (EU Democracy Support Annual Review p.16). Even more strikingly, as the authors of the previous assessment continue, 'those policymakers responsible for democracy aid are almost always unable to say how much their country was spending on this objective. This compares unfavourably with other areas of external funding'. The previous characterization represents a clear limitation in the task for dissecting the total aid figures further. However, one approximation can be done by referring to the specific sectors that aid was used for. Analysing the top 10 sectors for the entire EaP region up until, and inclusive of, 2021, the following picture is retrieved:



**Figure 2: Breakdown of the top 10 aid categories of EU inducive instruments to the EaP region between 2009 and 2021. Own presentation based on European Commission data.**

The largest share, slightly more than one quarter, was used for government and civil society actions. This included, for instance, money used for 'Core support to NGOs, other private bodies, PPPs, and research institutes', 'sector-type interventions', and 'project-type interventions'. However, this classification does not allow to dissect how much specifically of this support referred to broadly understood democracy promotion efforts and how much for other goals. It is therefore still a very imperfect and general approximation.

Another classification used, which seems most promising to achieve a more coherent figure is the classification into the 16 SDG categories. This is because category 5 (gender equality), 10 (equality), and 16 (peace, conflict resolution, and institutions) can be identified as broadly incorporating democracy promotion features, although potentially going beyond it (such as in case of SDG 16). It was nevertheless selected as the best possible option. Its accumulated values for all six EaP countries amount to roughly 1.675 billion Euro, being therefore a more conservative measure than that of the top 10 aid flow sectors, but still not being totally disconnected from it. Going therefore further and focusing specifically on broadly understood democracy promotion measures approximated by the SDGs, the graph below outlines the comparative perspective for all six EaP countries:



**Figure 3: Breakdown of EU inducive instruments to the EaP region between 2009 and 2021 by SDG categories 5, 10, and 16. Own presentation based on the European Commission (n.d.).**

Even when applying a broad and imperfect measure for democracy support based on the SDGs, the relatively low level of it becomes noticeable. This is in accordance with general studies on EU democracy support, which find that “the funds allocated for democracy aid remain relatively low compared to those for other policy areas such as climate action or security”. Noticeable is the relatively high level of support connected to peace and institutions in Armenia, which is almost triple that of the other two SDG categories combined. In Georgia, the distributions are more equal, but the equality component dominates. In Moldova, most emphasis was put on gender equality, but still exhibiting a relatively balanced distribution. In Ukraine, on the other hand, SDGs 5 and 16 have seen a much higher share of spendings than the one related to equality. Although Ukraine comes in these two categories first in absolute terms, the relative amount would be much lower due to its huge population size, mirroring the findings of the absolute inducive aid to Ukraine. The two outlier cases are Belarus and Azerbaijan, which received both in absolute as well as relative terms by far the least aid connected to any of the democracy promotion SDGs. The expansion of the sustainable development agenda has led to the emergence of new areas of cooperation within the SDGs that were not explicitly conceptualized and presented as part of accelerating the movement towards peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. SDG 16 provides a clear example of this, promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development in Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is within the framework of SDG 16 that can become a confirmation of the mutual intention of Armenia and Azerbaijan to normalize relations and conclude a peace treaty between the two countries.

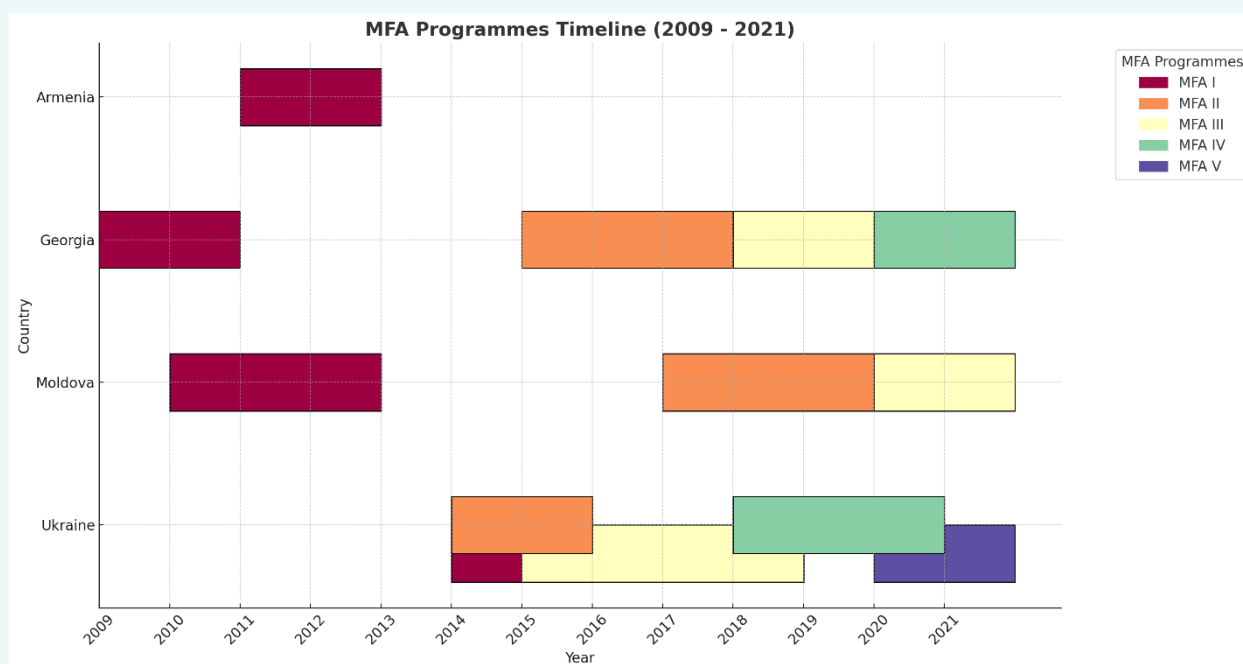
### 3.2.2 Enforcing

These MFAs are 'EU financial instrument extended to partner countries experiencing a balance-of-payments crisis [whose precondition for receipt is] the beneficiary country's adherence to effective democratic mechanisms, which includes having a multi-party parliamentary system and observing the rule of law, and the country's respect of human rights' (European Commission 2023, 2).

Evaluating the enforcing instrument on the financial level, a somewhat different picture compared to the inducive one is retrieved. This becomes already visible when evaluating the existence of macro-financial assistance programmes, which are the primary instrument in this respect. They are 'a form of financial aid extended by the EU to partner countries experiencing a balance of payments crisis [which] take the form of medium/long-term loans or grants, or a combination of these' (European Commission n.d.a).

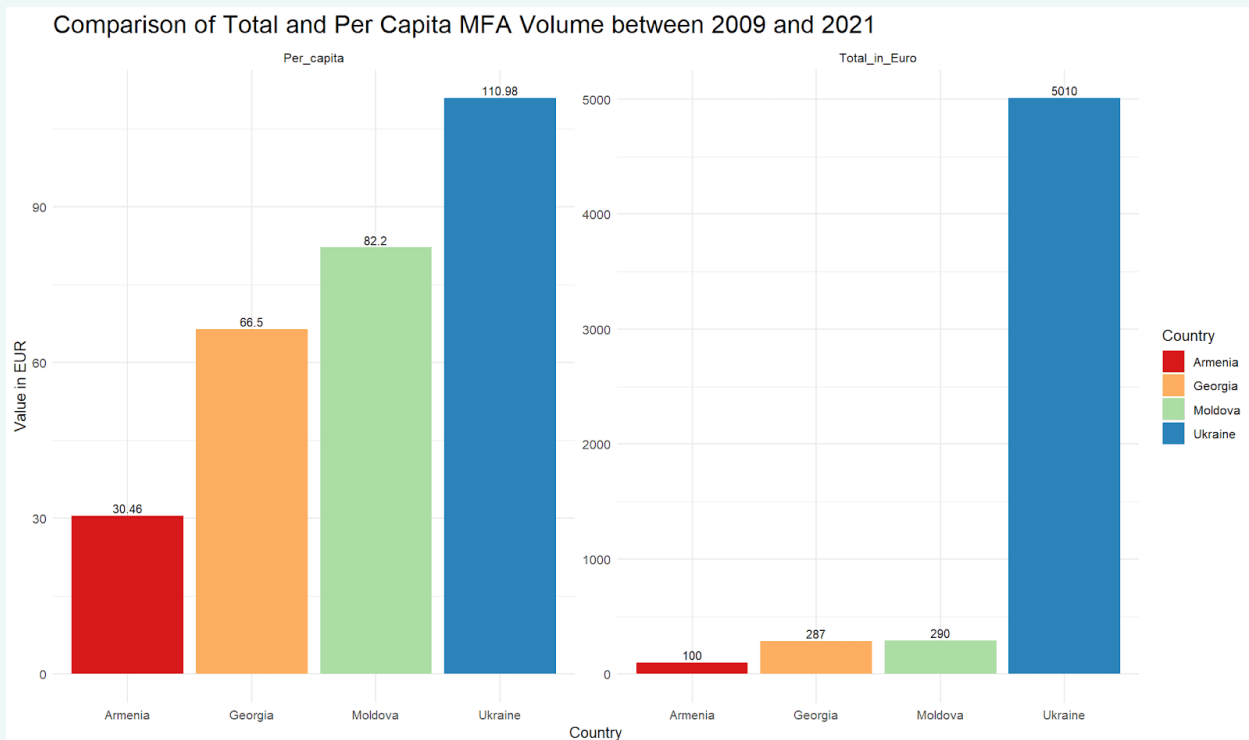
Officially, 'a pre-condition for granting MFA is the respect of human rights and effective democratic mechanisms, including a multi-party parliamentary system and the rule of law' and 'MFA funds are released in tranches strictly tied to the fulfilment of conditions aimed at strengthening macro-economic and financial stability' (European Commission, n.d.a). However, in reality, MFA programmes are also given to countries with difficulties in the rule of law sphere and then tied to good governance conditions through these programmes. For instance, in May 2015, the EU signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Ukraine for the issuance of €1.8 bin in MFA loans. As the corresponding description of the MoU notes, it 'includes a policy programme drawing from the ambitious reform agenda of the Ukrainian authorities [and] covers important economic and structural policy measures in six areas [...] governance and transparency [...which...] aim to facilitate progress on the country's main short-term priorities, outlined in the EU-Ukraine Association Agenda' (European Commission 2015). Hence, approximation with the main deliverables of the Association Agreement, also including a reference to the good governance principles, hence more broadly the EU's 'modernization and democratization agenda', was directly linked to MFA.

The same holds true for further programmes. In Ukraine's fourth MFA programme, which commenced in 2018, out of 18 conditions in total, four were exclusively related to 'public sector governance' and six to the 'fight against corruption and money laundering' (European Commission 2019). Only two were directly tied to the financial sector, making good governance conditions the by far most important aspect of this MFA. This shows that the EU's official narrative about the conceptions of these programmes does not always hold the way they are formally presented. From a comparative angle, out of the six EaP countries, all but Belarus and Azerbaijan received an MFA programme since 2009. The graph below outlines the timeline and the number of these programmes for all the countries that received this support:



**Figure 4: Overview of MFA programs to four EaP countries. Own presentation based on European Commission data.**

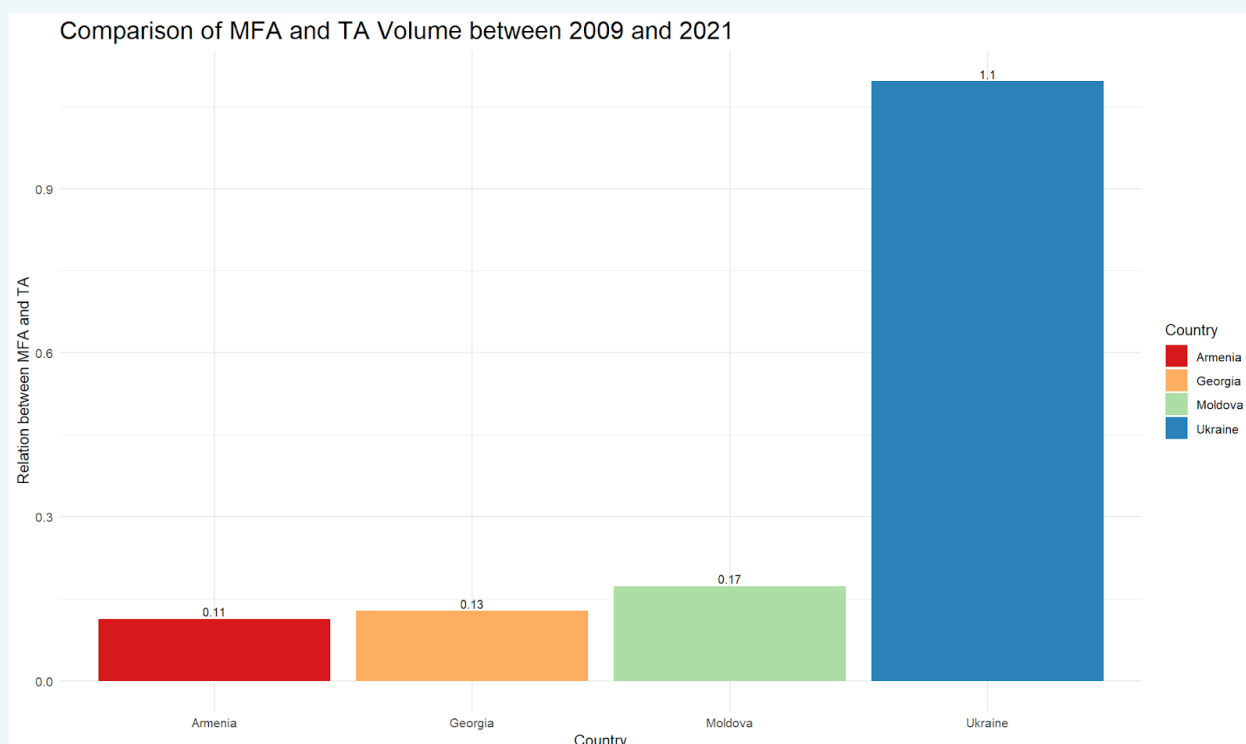
Whilst Armenia had its one and only programme running from 2011 until 2013, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, Ukraine only started to receive money from 2014 onwards. This is noteworthy, as the graph refers to the time when these programmes were operational, that is, when money was disbursed through them. It is therefore worth noting that Ukraine’s MFA I referred, in fact, to decisions taken in 2002 and 2010, but the conditions for it were not met until 2014 (European Commission n.d.b.). Starting from 2014, Ukraine had five operational MFA programmes, Georgia four from 2009 onwards, and Moldova three from 2010. For all of them, the MFA starting in 2020 referred to an exceptional, COVID-related situation (European Commission 2021). It is also worth noting that the composition of this support changed over time. For instance, whilst Georgia’s MFA I consisted of 100% grants, the share of grants in its MFA II was 50%, and decreased to less than a quarter (10 out of 45 billion Euro) in its MFA III (EEAS 2018). The same development is visible in Moldova, where grants made up 100% of its MFA I and then only 40% in its MFA II. Looking at the total and relative figures for MFA support, that is, enforcing support, a fundamentally different picture then in case of inductive aid is retrieved:



**Figure 5: Comparison of total and per capita MFA volume between 2009 and 2021. Own presentation based on European Commission data.**

Here, just as before, Ukraine showcases the by far biggest inflow volumes in absolute terms. However, assessing the per-capita level, where Ukraine has seen only a third or a sixth of the inductive inflow levels, it comes first in the enforcing category. Ukraine received over 5 billion Euro in MFA since 2014, being a multiple of the combined volume of all the other countries. In per capita terms, the differences are not that enormous. However, it must be noted that for the calculation of the per-capita level, the population of the temporarily occupied territories has been included (Crimea, parts of Luhansk and Donetsk Oblast). Whilst the other association countries also have occupied or breakaway regions, the population differentials are particularly huge in the case of Ukraine. Hence, without the inclusion, Ukraine's per-capita volumes would be even higher. Noteworthy, on the other hand, is that despite having one MFA programme less than Georgia, Moldova comes second on a per-capita level in this assessment.

The question of comparability, however, must also be posed. Whilst undoubtedly the main enforcing instruments, MFA programmes, are characterised by significant differences and usually tailored towards the recipient country. The previously mentioned example of Ukraine's fourth MFA programme is a telling example. Six out of 18 conditions tied to the disbursement of aid were explicitly in the anti-corruption field. In the case of Georgia, whose third MFA programme started in 2018 as well, no condition was in the sphere of anti-corruption. Instead, a much bigger emphasis was put on the business climate and the social safety net (European Commission 2019). This shows that MFA programmes, as proxies for the enforcing typology, do also have some limitations and a 1-1 comparison of MFA programmes is therefore not always possible. Nevertheless, one can compare the financial volume of MFA programmes (enforcing) with the financial volume of democracy-related aid (inductive). Looking first at the absolute relation, that is, absolute MFA volumes divided by absolute volumes of inductive funds, without making any distinction between the degree to which the aid was linked to democracy support, the following picture is retrieved:



**Figure 6: Relative relation of Enforcing to Inducive instruments for four EaP countries between 2009 and 2021. Own presentation based on European Commission data.**

It shows that only in Ukraine the volume of financially enforcing instruments outweigh those of financially inducive. In all other countries, inducive ones are a multiple of enforcing ones. For instance, in Moldova, the latter do not make up even one fifth of the latter. In Georgia, they are barely one eighth. If democracy-related aid is explicitly evaluated, then the comparison of the SDG figures (graph 3) with the graph on absolute volumes of MFA flows (graph 5) shows that in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova the volume of inducive, democracy-related aid is bigger than that of enforcing one. This comparison takes MFA programmes as democracy-promotion efforts by default. An assumption that is, as shown on Georgia’s MFA III, quite easily dismissed.

Only in Ukraine, where these MFA programmes were indeed linked to democracy-related conditions, the dominance of the enforcing over inducive aid channel can be clearly established. This was seconded by other assessments, as the Court of Auditors concluded that between 2014 and 2020 around €3.8 bn. Was dispersed via MFA programmes to Ukraine in some way addressing governance reforms, but only €306 and €305 million to projects dealing with good governance and the rule of law as well as institutional building projects respectively (Court of Auditors 2021). During the same period, only roughly €12 million was disbursed to the civil society in the anti-corruption/governance sector. This shows the disproportion between the financial weight of MFA conditionality programmes and all other mechanisms that might promote good governance and indirectly democracy. In the case of Azerbaijan and Belarus, where no MFA programme was running over the assessment period, no such comparison can be made.

It is worth noting that also other financial instruments beyond MFAs exhibit some degree of conditionality, albeit a less explicit one. Through this, the border between enforcing and inducive becomes at times blurry. For instance, the overall amount of financial support connected to the implementation of reforms outlined in the CEPA between the EU and Armenia amounted to ‘over €211 million’ in the period between 2017 and 2020 (EEAS 2021). In addition, this figure was subject to a certain degree of flexibility, as there were ad-hoc decisions with respect to financial aid. For one, this happened after the so-called Velvet Revolution in 2018, after which the EU explicitly increased its financial support to Armenia and over €65 million were allocated in grants in 2019, of which ‘thirty million euro were allocated as budget and technical support to Justice reforms’ alone (Khvorostiankina 2023, 12). A further increase in support took place after the democratically

solid elections of 2020, through which the EU increased its support by a further 65%, leaving Armenian policymakers to note that the EU's financial assistance 'has a clear political undertone [as] the EU usually provides funding in exchange for reforms' (Mejlumyan 2021). The flexible character of it highlights a degree of reactivity of Brussels towards dynamic changes in a country and the fact that the size of inductive instruments, such as technical support, might depend on conditions that are more a feature of enforcing instruments.

Along with the reduction in financial assistance, starting in October 2020, in response to the situation that arose after the presidential elections and following Belarus' involvement in Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, the EU took restrictive measures against Belarus. These restrictions include sanctions against individuals, trade restrictions, airspace bans, a ban on transactions with the Central Bank of Belarus, as well as a SWIFT ban on five Belarusian banks, restrictions on the flow of funds from Belarus to the EU e.t.c. (European Council 2023).

### 3.3 Political Instruments

#### 3.3.1 Enforcing

A similar point happened with the visa liberalization process that was running besides the ongoing Association Agreement negotiations for the three association countries (European Commission n.d.c). In 2008, Ukraine started negotiating a visa liberalization scheme with the EU. Moldova followed in 2010 and Georgia subsequently in 2012. As part of the process, Visa Liberalisation Action Plans (VLAP) were set up, which were periodically reviewed. They focused on 'four blocks of benchmarks related to document security, including biometrics; border management, migration and asylum; public order and security; and external relations and fundamental rights'.

Parts of it directly relate back to what can be understood as 'good governance', as the public order and security conditions imposed on Georgia, for instance, required the country to perform the 'consolidation, according to EU and international standards, of the legal and institutional framework for preventing and fighting corruption' (European Commission 2013, 14). The same applied to Ukraine and Moldova. Similarly, the fundamental rights part outlined for Georgia the 'adoption of a comprehensive anti-discrimination law, as recommended by UN and Council of Europe monitoring bodies, to ensure effective protection against discrimination' as well as 'fair and transparent conditions for the acquisition of Georgian citizenship', relating once again back to the principles of effectiveness and access. These VLAPs were periodically assessed with respect to the completion of the laid-out, conditional benchmarks and only in 2017, after 9 years of ongoing assessments, did the EU Council approve the liberalization scheme to take place in the case of Ukraine (European Council 2017).

Considering the available instruments for the other EaP countries, one can separate Armenia, on the one hand, and Azerbaijan as well as Belarus on the other. That is because Armenia was, just like the three association countries, also negotiating an Association Agreement with the EU. These negotiations commenced in 2010 and, as late as 2012, there were official remarks with respect to a potential finalization of these discussions until the EaP Vilnius Summit in 2013 (PR Newswire 2012). However, reportedly under pressure from Russia, Armenia subsequently joined Customs Union in 2013 and later to the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014. In the aftermath, a new legal framework for the cooperation between the EU and Armenia was developed with the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which was signed in 2017. It emphasizes the commitment 'to further strengthening respect for fundamental freedoms, human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, democratic principles, the rule of law, and good governance' (CEPA 2018: Preamble). In its essence, it tries to mirror the Association Agreement's political objectives whilst excluding the trade-related parts, which would be incompatible with Yerevan's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Considering the identified trends, as well as the bipolarity of the geopolitical position of Armenia in the European and Eurasian arenas, the development of the integration mechanism on a geopolitical scale should take a new direction. The development of

integration economic cooperation with Russia as a serious opportunity to increase the level of economic development of Armenia, having come to such an agreed decision. Among the EAEU countries, Armenia stands out especially, whose economy is distinguished by a high degree of development of the processes of liberalization and diversification of production, with the goal of increasing the level of integration into the world economy.

As for the support instruments, there are fewer available streams as compared to the Association countries, but not necessarily less money as such. On the one hand, no visa conditionality is available as of now, as a Visa Dialogue between the EU and Armenia, which would set out these conditions, has not begun yet, despite Armenia's explicit desire to do so (Armenpress 2023). On the other hand, the last MFA package for Armenia stems from the year 2009. Since then, no additional, MFA support has been given.

EU-Belarus relations have gone through different stages of development, which have been determining the formats of democracy support instruments and financial assistance. Since the release of political prisoners in Belarus in 2015, relations between the EU and Belarus have improved markedly. Conclusions of Council of the EU on Belarus of February 2016 led to the abolition of most individual restrictive measures, as well as to an expansion of dialogue on government issues and an increase in financial assistance (European Council 2016). Later, improvements in relations were interrupted because of the rigged presidential elections of August 9, 2020, followed by massive repression of protesters, civil society representatives, human rights defenders, and the media. In June 2021, in response to restrictions and sanctions, Belarus announced the suspension of the Readmission Agreement and suspension of its participation in the Eastern Partnership. Meanwhile the Visa Facilitation Agreement between the EU and Belarus, which entered into force on 1 July 2020 (in parallel with Readmission Agreement), was partially suspended in October 2021 by a Council decision (European Council 2021a).

### 3.3.2 Inducive

However, besides including good governance benchmarks in conditional MFA and visa liberalization programmes, the EU also supported these principles 'by means of political and policy dialogue [and] project activities' (Court of Auditors 2021, 13). In Ukraine, political and policy dialogues largely comprise the fora created by the Association Agreement. That is, via the Association Council, the Association Committee, the Parliamentary Committee, as well as during high-level annual EU-Ukraine Summits that bring together the President of Ukraine and the Head of both the European Council and the EU Commission (Mission of Ukraine to the European Union 2020). During these dialogues, the parties largely 'reaffirm' commitments, 'acknowledge' progress, and declare to 'continue to support' (European Council 2020a).

Besides foreseeing the import of a large part of the Acquis in the case of association countries, also additional institutional frameworks were created that envision in principle to provide actual instruments to solidify the normative approximation of these countries with the EU. As such, Article 461 of Title VII Chapter 1 of the Association Agreements between Ukraine and the EU foresaw the creation of an Association Council, which is supposed to be 'a forum for exchange of information on European Union and Ukrainian legislative acts, both under preparation and in force, and on implementation, enforcement and compliance measures' (Association Agreement 2014, Article 463). In addition, an Association Committee, sub-committees, and a Parliamentary Association Committee were created, focusing on various aspects of cooperation and support to association countries.

As for Azerbaijan, it has always shown restraint in both European and Eurasian integration processes. Brussels and Baku could not find common ground with respect to an Association Agreement, which the latter rejected in 2013 due to its too narrow focus on values (Gils 2022). Whilst alternative forms of agreements were subsequently negotiated, only Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the resulting energy crisis in Europe led to an upgrade of the relations. Baku and Brussels then agreed to deepen their strategic partnership aimed at doubling gas supplies by 2027 by signing a Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy (European Commission 2022). However, with respect to other fields, this partnership is still

based on the 1999 EU-Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EEAS 2022). Not least due to this, both the number of instruments used, and the actual amount of democracy-support funds transferred to Azerbaijan was very limited.

To summarise, it can be said that the EU has combined procedural methods and substantive components to construct a long-term regional initiative devoted to democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. The diversity of instruments used with respect to the EaP countries is represented in the table below:

Instrument family	Main instrument	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Belarus	Georgia	Moldova	Ukraine
Enforcing financial	MFA	Small (positive)	None	Small- Middle (negative)	Middle (positive)	Middle (positive)	High (positive)
Inducive financial	Various types of aid	Middle- High	Small	Small	High	High	Middle
Enforcing political	Visa conditionalities	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Inducive political	Dialogue	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Twinning						

**Table 2: Overview of instruments linked to democracy promotion. Own work.**

### 3.4 Regional Level Initiatives

EaP projects have been conducted not just in individual countries, but also regionally, incorporating either all six countries or a portion of them. Therefore, this section will outline the number and scope of initiatives which are targeted at all the EaP countries vis-à-vis those focused on a smaller number of partners. This scoping exercise will highlight trends between each of these categories as well as how the type of project has evolved over time.

As highlighted in table 1 of the Appendix, both the number of projects and what they incorporate has expanded substantively between the 2004-2014 and 2015-2022 timeframes. Within this expansion of EU activities in the region, we can see that in the earlier period, attention was focused on business, climate and the environment, student mobility and education and energy related projects. Whilst projects related to the finance and business sector and energy were still prominent in the later period, we can see an increase in the number of projects focused on civil society, gender, combatting crime and to a lesser extent, culture, communication, health, justice and legal reform, media and journalism and water projects. Overall, however, we see a huge variety of projects within the EaP countries.

The expansion of gender and civil society-based projects is striking and underpins not only the core EU norm of gender equality, but also an understanding that civil society is key in the expansion of democratic and gender norms. It also reflects the additional focus on gender mainstreaming and gender equality within the EU, particularly within the EEAS, starting in 2015 with the appointment of Mara Marinaki as the EU’s Advisor on Gender and on the implementation of UNSCR1325. Meanwhile combatting crime, incorporating anti-corruption, is another key underpinning in ensuring governance in the eastern partnership countries, aligning with a normative focus on the rule of law within the EU. It is also important to note that in some of these projects, engaging with civil society is also part of the core objectives.

A smaller number of projects incorporate all the EaP countries except Belarus, with most of these being initiated after the downscaling of the EU’s relations with the government of Belarus due to the brutal crackdown on peaceful protesters following the Presidential elections held on 9 August. These 11 (2 initiated prior to 2015 and 2 prior to 2020) projects relate to civil society, energy, conflict support and dialogue, business, culture and heritage protection. Civil society and energy projects, make up just over half of these, again underpinning the importance of the former.

There are then projects which focus on a smaller group of countries within the EaP. Of those seven projects incorporating four partners, these all include Georgia and Armenia, six include Moldova, five Ukraine, and three Azerbaijan, with the projects themselves incorporating culture, business, energy, civil society, mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and dialogue/conflict. The projects falling into the latter category seek to improve understanding between conflict parties within the South Caucasus and Moldova through meetings, networks, capacity building activities, as well as through education and culture. This underpins the importance the EU places on security in the region.

Meanwhile, the seven projects incorporating three EaP countries follow a similar set of topics, highlighting energy, business, gender, youth and civil society. Of more interest are the ten projects which include just two EaP countries. It is here that we see a clear focus on border security issues (eight projects). This includes the EU's border assistance mission (EUBAM) in Moldova and Ukraine, in addition to border projects between Belarus and Ukraine, Armenia and Georgia, and Georgia and Azerbaijan. This is in comparison to those security related projects targeted at the region as a whole, which are more thematic and focus on crime and anti-corruption (related to border security as well as security within the EaP countries), in addition to cyber security and natural disasters.

## 4 ANALYSIS

To critically analyse the outcomes of the EU's democracy promotion efforts in the Eastern Neighbourhood region, this part first establishes a comparative picture by depicting two major indices and benchmarks for democracy and good governance levels. The subsequent step establishes and discusses the general effectiveness of the EaP in this context. The next part then looks at the consistency of the EU's democracy promotion efforts towards this region. Lastly, the challenges that the EU faces are elaborated.

### 4.1 Development of key democracy promotions and good governance indicators

To assess the development of democracy levels, particularly in a comparative perspective, the Polyarchy index included in the Vdem dataset was chosen. This index 'seeks to embody the core value of making rulers responsive to citizens, achieved through electoral competition for the electorate's approval under circumstances when suffrage is extensive; political and civil society organizations can operate freely; elections are clean and not marred by fraud or systematic irregularities; and elections affect the composition of the chief executive of the country' (Coppedge et al. 2023, 44). This index consists of various sub-indices and components, accounting for the various dimensions that electoral democracies encompass. Its advantages are threefold. First, the index has a strong theoretical underpinning by being closely connected to the dimensions of democracy posed in the influential book 'Polyarchy: Participation and opposition' by Robert Dahl (1971). Secondly, all indices are constructed using a large variety of data. And, thirdly, the index based on this data is normalized across all countries in the sample, which allows a comparative analysis. Graph no. 7 below depicts the development of the index for the six EaP countries as well as the average EU New Member State (NMS) value since 1989:

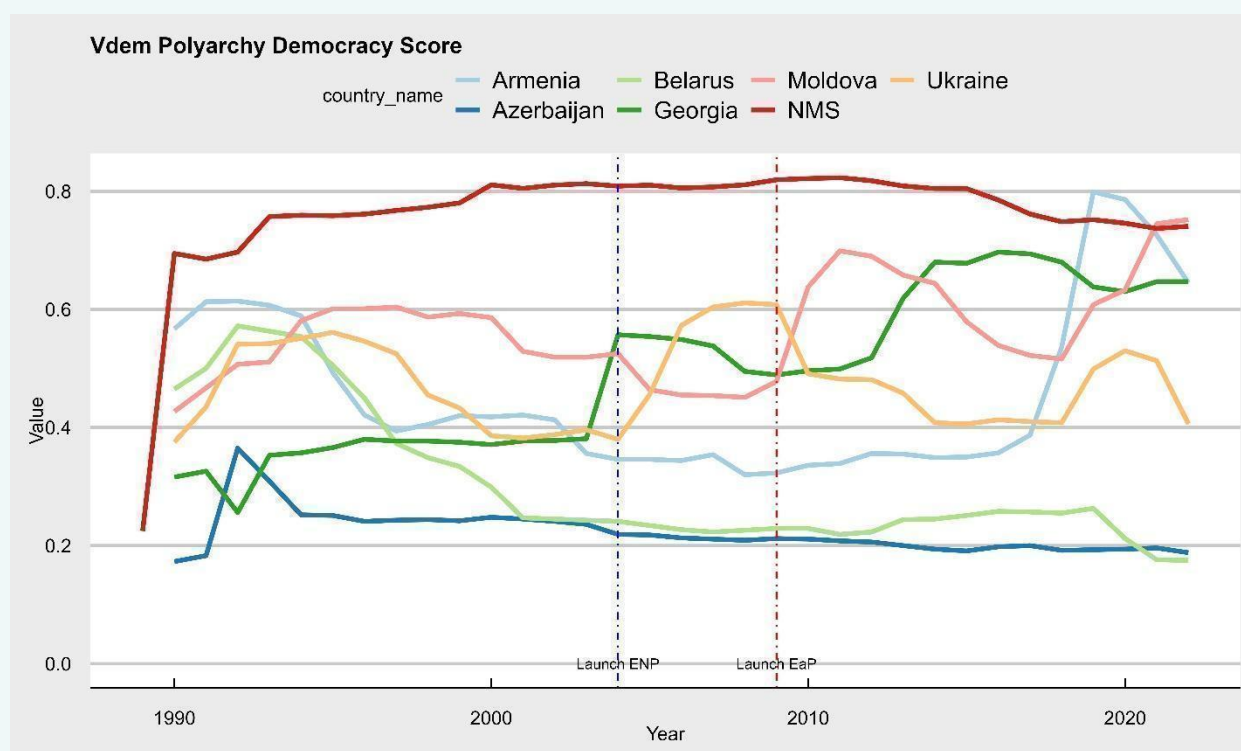


Figure 7: Vdem Polyarchy Democracy Score for the six EaP countries and the average of the EU new member state between 1989 and 2022.

Noticeably, after the average of the NMS countries significantly rose following the 1990s, remaining constantly well above all other EaP countries up until the late 2010s. Then, so-called backsliding processes took place, which decreased the electoral democracy level. Around the 2020s, a few of the EaP countries

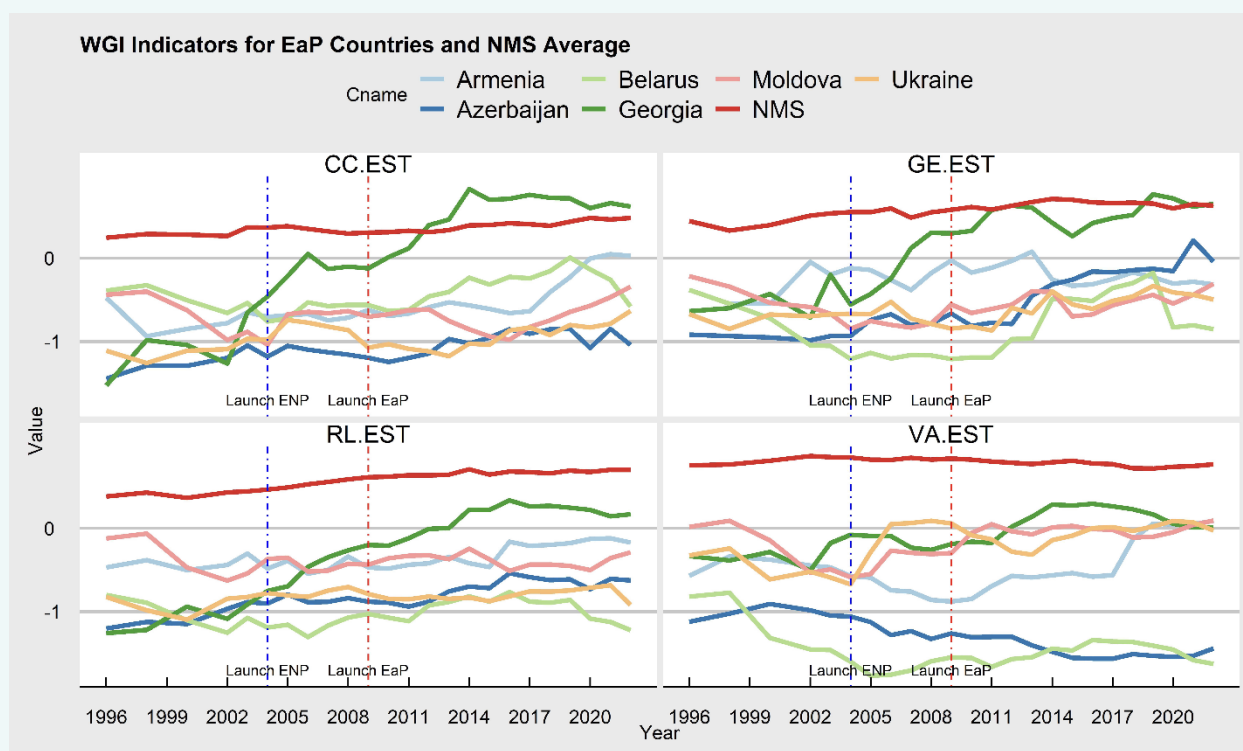
reached levels close to the average NMS country, or even overtaking them, as in the case of Armenia in 2019 and 2020 as well as Moldova in 2021 and 2022. This is the first group of countries that can be distinguished within the EaP. Noticeably, however, in the case of the few EaP countries with similar levels like the NMS, democracy levels rose in waves. Whereas the NMS countries quickly reached a relatively high level of electoral democracy, the EaP countries experience rises and then stagnation and/or decreases for subsequent years.

This is also clearly visible with respect to the second group, to which mostly Ukraine can be counted to: Ukraine, as a country that experienced waves of electoral democracy score increases as well decreases, but without coming at any point particularly close to the average NMS level. Noteworthy, Ukraine's biggest period of decreases also took place right after the launch of the EaP, which stands in contrast to the first group, of which all countries experienced bigger or smaller gains after the programme launch in 2009. The last group consists of Belarus and Azerbaijan, the two authoritarian countries in this country sample. Both have shown very little variation in the electoral democracy levels from the moment both the ENP and later the EaP were launched.

The second source used to benchmark observable outcomes are the World Governance Indicators, which refer to the broadly understood notion of good governance. Georgia represents in this respect an outlier country by overtaking the average NMS value in the corruption control measure and being practically equal to the average value in the government effectiveness indicator. All scores for Georgia have considerably increased after the launch of the EaP. However, with the exception of government effectiveness, Georgia is experiencing slightly decreasing values since the mid-2010s, which is also visible in the Vdem score represented in graph 7. This particularly concerns the voice and accountability indicator, which has practically become equal between all EaP countries with the exception of Azerbaijan and Moldova.

Armenia can be placed as second in this entire sample, with two indicators being behind Georgia, but in all well below NMS levels. Noticeably, the significant rise of the corruption control and voice and accountability indicator happened after the 2018 revolution, which also corresponds with a clear rise of the Vdem democracy index. Moldova, whilst being the highest-rated country in the Vdem index in 2022, being the only country above the average NMS value in that period, shows a noticeably worse performance with respect to the good governance indicators. Only in the voice accountability indicator is it the best-placed EaP country by a slight margin. Noticeably, only the corruption control as well as the government effectiveness indicators have somewhat improved over the course of the past years. No visible correlation to the launch of the EaP is visible. Ukraine similarly mostly stagnated over the past 15 years, without showing any significant changes. Corruption levels in 2022 are on the levels observed after the Orange Revolution.

The two authoritarian countries depict an interesting picture. Belarus used to show a relatively good development in the corruption control indicator, which placed the country second in the mid-2010s in the sample. This lasted up until the brutal crackdown of the 2020 protests, after which the further autocratisation of the country collided with a massive drop of corruption control and government effectiveness indicators. The later indicator also showed an upward curve until 2020 revolution and placed Belarus for some years almost on par with Azerbaijan in second place. This shows one paradox of non-democratic regimes: whilst leaving relatively little scope for accountability, corruption can be lower and/or government effectiveness higher than in some more democratic regimes. Azerbaijan exemplifies the case of a corrupt yet relatively effective authoritarian regime, in which neither rule of law nor voice and accountability have experienced any positive changes since the launch of the ENP and the EaP respectively.



**Figure 8: WGI indicators for the six EaP countries and the average of the EU new member state between 1996 and 2022.**

## 4.2 Coherence

As outlined in the theoretical framework, coherence encompasses two dimensions: cohesion and consistency. Cohesion focuses conceptually on the relationship between the EU as an institution and other member states, for which it is largely out of scope of this assessment that investigates exclusively EU actions. Consistency, on the other hand, can be understood from two dimensions. One is the sectoral dimension, which describes the degree to which ‘EU policies in one area should not undermine or cut across policies in other areas’ (Conceição-Heldt & Meunier 2014). Secondly, a temporal dimension of consistency can also be distinguished, which denotes the degree to which the approach from the EU towards the EaP states in the democracy promotion realm is congruent over a certain period of time. This can also be understood as the traceability of benchmarks and yardsticks in the good governance realm across periods. A lack of consistency in the temporal realm does similar harm to the overall outcome as sector inconsistency, as will be shown. Both types of inconsistency are interlinked.

Sectoral inconsistency plays a particular role in light of the CSDP with its geopolitical dimension. The importance of this region from that perspective has already been established (e.g., Schimmelfennig 2015). As democracy promotion does not take place in a vacuum but is subject to intervening influences and considerations, these geopolitical factors play an important role. Two channels affecting this consistency in the democracy promotion realm are detectable, of which both are rooted in the geopolitical rivalry that the EU and Russia face in their shared neighbourhood.

For one, this is the aspect of propaganda. An already introduced problem of democracy promotion is the usual desire of local elites to keep their preferential access to resources. Hence, the incentive structure for reforms faces an uphill battle from the beginning, because ‘it goes to the heart of political regimes and political power and is likely to meet with particularly strong resistance’ (Schimmelfennig 2021). This is complicated by the fact that pro-European policymakers in the region usually face pro-Russian competitors. In such a situation, calling out reform imitation or shortcomings by Brussels in these countries might

potentially strengthen these competitors as it gives fuel to their and the Kremlin's narratives that the European path has not brought much (Richter 2023).

For the Kremlin, presenting pro-European neighbourhood countries as failed states is a major *raison d'être* and many resources have been spent from the beginning of post-Maidan Ukraine to create this image as well as promote politicians in Ukraine that benefit from this narrative (Boyd-Barrett 2017). This represents a moral hazard to Brussels as it then faces a prisoner's dilemma of how to respond to nominally pro-European politicians in these countries that usually abstain from conducting the reforms to the necessary degree. The EU can either try to maximize its limited leverage, which it rarely does, and risk boosting pro-Russian forces in these countries that might potentially lead to a change of leadership and therefore loss of geopolitical influence. Or Brussels can abstain from voicing too loud of a criticism and therefore becoming effectively inconsistent in its democracy promotion task as it gets overshadowed by the geopolitical considerations present, among others, in the CSDP (Schimmelfennig 2015).

Second, it is worth noting that this dilemma not only leads to failing to call out developments that represent insufficient progress in the democracy promotion realm, but the EU even ends up rewarding some countries for doing so. This is once again linked to the geopolitical rivalry and the fear of promoting Russian narratives of pro-European, failed states in the region (Cadier 2021). This is indeed visible, and conceptually problematic, with respect to conditionality provisions. Because some of the conditionality payments are inherently linked to the fulfilment of projects and milestones representing good governance, the geopolitical dilemma presented before leads to a situation where not only insufficient progress is not called out as such, but factually even rewarded to some extent (Richter 2023). As other studies have shown, for instance, in Ukraine, Brussels representatives themselves admit that they must keep 'Ukraine afloat for geopolitical reasons' (Richter 2023, 13). As large chunks, and in the case of Ukraine even the majority, of the financial aid to the EaP were disbursed through the conditionality mechanism (see Chapter 3), this means that the mechanism is more a geopolitical vehicle to support pro-Western governments than one effectively skewing the incentive structure of these elites in favour of democratic reform.

This lack of sectoral consistency, where democracy promotion policies are overshadowed by other ones, is exacerbated, and possibly even enabled in the first place, by the lack of a temporal consistency. This is visible when assessing even the track of records of the EU's interaction with the three association countries, where the ambitious reform agenda, as laid out in the Association Agreement, is formally tracked by a yearly so-called Association Implementation Report (Richter 2023). However, in those reports, focus points in critical sectors from one year are usually not referenced and cross-checked in the subsequent year. No specific a priori benchmarks and measures are established that would serve as a temporal guideline. Instead, selected individual projects and broad progress elaborations are put forward in the Reports which usually have no direct linkage to the previous years, or are assessed using different, mostly somewhat vague measures (Richter 2023).

This lack of temporal consistency, which extends to the inconsistency of measures, opens the possibility to publicly interpret good governance developments depending on different ramifications and considerations rather than independent of them. This extends to the previous elaboration of geopolitical factors. That is because only by being inconsistent in the selection and application of yardsticks of its policies and therefore being inconsistent over periods, can the EU ad-hoc adjust its good governance assessment dependent on these other factors. Otherwise, in case it was consistent, shortcomings would have to be called out and/or be noticeable by external observers. Due to the vagueness of its measures, and the possibility to adjust them to the assessment of projects and developments, Brussels can this way react to geopolitical necessities, as laid out in the part on the sectoral inconsistency but faces the drawback that the incentive structure to foster good governance reforms is significantly weakened this way.

### 4.3 Effectiveness

Having earlier established the broad contours of outcomes based on two different sources of data as well as the coherence indicator, it should be highlighted that the relative benchmarking happened vis-à-vis the NMS group and not old EU countries. This stems from the consideration of comparability as institutional features were similar between the post-socialist countries of today's EaP and NMS groups. However, with respect to current trends, this also means that the benchmarking relative to the NMS happened in the second half of the 2010s under the condition of backsliding processes in some countries of the EaP group. Most notably, Hungary and Poland (Bernhard 2021). This is an important piece of background information when evaluating the relative success of the EaP policy.

The key metric of success is, as established before, effectiveness. It has been generally defined as 'the ability to influence outcomes' (Conceição-Heldt & Meunier 2014). At a first glance, there is some room for an optimistic assessment, as the launch of the EaP coincided with one direct and a second slightly delayed increase of democracy levels in two of the EaP countries, namely Moldova and Georgia. However, in the former case, the signature of the Association Agreement coincided with a drastic decrease of democracy levels first and only later increased after a pro-European president, Maia Sandu, was voted into power. Noteworthy, Armenia, a country without a direct association status, was for a brief period the leading country of the EaP group in terms of democracy levels. This was the case after the Velvet Revolution of 2018, which saw a new government coming into power on the principles of anti-corruption and good governance.

A case like Ukraine, which experienced significant backsliding after the launch of the EaP under its then-president Viktor Yanukovich and still formally received the opportunity to become an association country in 2013 despite this trend, leaves some questions with respect to the effectiveness of the EaP. It is in any case difficult to infer directly from these broad developments the effectiveness of the policy, as aid levels were relatively low and a timely-coincidence between support and democratic change or revolution might not necessarily indicate causality. As a result, there is rather broad consensus in the literature that 'The ENP policy has not been able to stimulate comprehensive domestic change; at best, some results were delivered at a sectoral level, mainly when the EU provided clear sector-specific conditionality and tangible rewards (for example, the success of visa liberalisation in Moldova, granted by the EU in 2014' (Wolczuk 2018). Noteworthy, however, in the case of Ukraine, where clear conditions tied to the rule of law were incorporated into its MFA programmes, there is visibly no substantial progress in these sectors that could be framed as a real breakthrough.

Delving more deeply into the analysis of these outcomes, one limitation and one precondition can be distinguished in the EaP context. The former is the ownership for these outcomes. As the actual ownership for reforms is per definition in the hands of policymakers in the receiving country, projects within this framework can be seen as instruments aimed at affecting the incentive structure of political elites to decide for one set of political choices versus another. As the overarching goal of EaP policies is the construction of deep and sustainable democratic systems in these countries, effectiveness can be understood as the degree to which the EaP projects incentivize stakeholders in receiving countries to embrace policies corresponding to this path. The precondition for this effect to take place because of these programmes is, however, a congruent project planning, execution, and monitoring process whereas individual projects that cover a much shorter time span correspond and contribute to the broad long-term goal.

The last aspect is one that has been shown to represent a clear issue with respect to the overall effectiveness, particularly in the context of key reform pieces, such as in the rule of law sector. The EU Court of Auditors report on EU-supported anti-corruption reforms in Ukraine notes in this respect that 'a system [is] in place for monitoring and evaluating its projects. However, assessing how far the projects helped to fight any type of corruption is difficult for half of the projects audited, as outcomes are not measurable (due to a lack of baselines, targets and relevant indicators) and refer to outputs and activities' (European Court of Auditors

2021, 5). Hence, already on the EU side, difficulties to link its projects under the EaP banner to the broader goals that they are supposed to serve become visible. This finding is confirmed in earlier studies, where the ‘implementation of reforms agreed in the individual ‘ENP Action Plans’ has not necessarily been a straightforward exercise with clear aims, clear definitions of the roles of the various actors involved, and clear steps in adaptation to EU standards’ (Batora & Rieker 2018, 464). It therefore seems to represent a constant issue the EU is facing in that sphere.

This gap is particularly problematic in light of key interests of elites that tend to derive a large share of their economic and/or political power from restricted access to resources that hybrid and autocratic regimes are characterized by (Hellman et al. 2003). Elites are therefore skilled in paying lip service to long-term reform commitments and initiating short-term formal reforms that are either ineffective from the beginning or overwritten by other developments in the mid-run as to keep their preferential access to political and economic resources. Hereby, elites use this linkage gap between short-term EaP projects and long-term goals. The lack of a mid-term perspective can lead to the partial reform equilibrium. Through it, a system might open-up, but this new openness is being used by political elites for their own sake without many incentives to push through this equilibrium. Exemplary, in Ukraine, the largest recipient of EU funds outside of the EU already prior to the large-scale invasion of 2022, pro-European reforms and even pro-European revolutions ended up changing merely the formal composition of acting elites as well as the formal construct of the country rather than bringing about a factual democratic breakthrough (Pleines 2016).

This brings about a third problem with respect to the effectiveness of EaP programmes: the monitoring process and the execution of conditional support in the light of a dominance of informal rules of the game as well as the impact of intervening factors. Even in the case of EU association countries, a strong focus is put on the import of a legal framework and on the implementation of formal laws. However, the previously mentioned preferential access to resources of key elites is characterized by a strong dominance of informality. That is, key laws can be passed but remain largely ineffective due to being overshadowed by dominating informal institutions. This has also been criticised in the Court of Auditor report, exemplary on the case of an EU key programme on anti-corruption legislation in Ukraine, in which ‘the indicator referred to the number of drafted and advocated laws, but not to their implementation or impact’ (European Court of Auditors 2021, 29).

This gap between formal and factual reality complicates the conditionality mechanism, arguably the most powerful tool of the EU to bring about effectiveness in the EaP context and incentivize local elites to conform to democratic reforms. On the one hand, the question of how reality is perceived and understood becomes important (Richter 2023). For instance, whilst the enactment of a particular legislation is measurable and can be taken as an impartial condition for the provision of (financial) support, the assessment of its actual working mechanism in practice can be up to debate and influenced by factors independent of the legislation as such. Facing these inherent issues, it has therefore been also asked on a much more fundamental level, ‘how the *acquis*, developed in the process of economic integration of EU member states, can be transferred selectively to non-member states to facilitate their participation in the internal market. Indeed, some Commission officials argued that in the neighbourhood context ‘transferring the *acquis* wholesale would be unwise, unrealistic and –in some aspects – unaffordable’ (Wolczuk 2018).

This task is further complicated by questions of sovereignty. As mentioned earlier, the agency for change is on the side of the recipient country. How far an effective incentivization and corresponding conditionality demands can go is subject to debate. E.g., even nominally pro-European elites in Ukraine have repeatedly dismissed conditionality demands on the ground of national sovereignty considerations. This is particularly the case in sensitive sectors, such as the judiciary, where questions of how far a political and external actor can intervene are subject to debate. All this complicates the proper formulation and further execution of conditional reforms, which is further strengthened by coherence considerations and therefore limits the effectiveness of the EaP with respect to its grand goals.

However, the importance of conditionality, that is, the external top-bottom approach for incentives and reforms, plays a crucial role in the bottom-up approach in promoting democracy, that is primarily through

CSOs. This is because a paradox development has taken place over the course of years, largely in the freer EaP countries, such as Ukraine. A decisive professionalisation of civil society has occurred and the ability of these groups at spotting and signalling problematic developments has taken place (Palyvoda et al. 2018). However, despite all development programmes, the civil society sector has been generally described as weak with respect to promoting key political reforms on their own (Richter 2023a). This is not least as COS have been described as distant from society and as ‘grant eaters’. That is, they have become dependent on external actors financially that disincentives them from connecting to society at large. As such, CSOs in relatively free countries as Ukraine admit that the conditionality channel is the only way to push through and operationalize important reforms in crucial sectors. Therefore, the effectiveness of the indirect, bottom-up approach has, despite a huge emphasis on it, so far been context dependent, yet relatively unsuccessful with respect to the elaborated grand goals.

Finally, however, a counterfactual question might be asked about the effectiveness: what would have happened without EU democracy support? The global trends of backsliding that were introduced at the beginning of this section when referring to the NMS countries pose the question of whether EU support, if not outrightly leading to democratic breakthrough cases, might have at least prevented a deterioration of semi-democratic standards. Here, indeed, it is visible that in the case of association countries, such as Ukraine, the EU managed to safeguard key reforms that fall short of a democratization breakthrough but nevertheless represent limited democratization progress (Richter 2023a). Examples include the reversal of the October 2020 Constitutional Court of Ukraine decision on the asset declaration system, which was successfully fought back against by, among others, the EU. From this perspective, effectiveness was observed, however, not from the democracy promotion perspective but from the lens of backsliding prevention.

## 4.4 Challenges

One of the main challenges has always been the balance between providing an off-the-shelf generic template towards supporting democracy, and the degree of bespoke measures to suit each country’s domestic and geopolitical context. This tension is seen across a number of dimensions: (a) the issue of what constitutes the neighbourhood and where the borders are; (b) the application of democratization and the difference between top-down approaches and bottom-up growth for democracy support and the adaptation of the classic EU democracy models to the local context; (c) the issue of what kind of democracy the EU projects, i.e., an issue of liberal order. These challenges have hit against the wall of security in the region, local conflicts and issues of statehood and sovereignty; political economy in terms of budget control but also distribution of wealth and resources among different social and political groups, including problems of corruption and appropriation of power; a distinctive civil society that had been suppressed in the context of the Cold War and previous political regimes, now in search for their identity but also their position within the political system of their country. Especially in the context of the 2020s, some of these issues have been accentuated based on debates around sustainability and climate change, energy autonomy and security, and post-pandemic recovery (see Chapter 3 and annex).

Unpacking the political challenges, illiberalism has found fertile ground and countries have oscillated between different regime types. The challenge for the EU is how to modify its strategy for countries that are progressing towards illiberalism and authoritarianism, how to restart democratisation processes and how to offer the necessary support to sustain a path of democratisation in countries where progress has been achieved (in other words, how can the EU help the spill over effects of democracy into all areas of public life). One of the first foreign policy strategies to indicate these issues was the EU’s 2016 Global Strategy, ‘Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe’ (1. European External Action Service, “A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy” (2016). Arguing that the EU’s cardinal role was to ‘promote a rules-based global order with multilateralism as its key principle and the United Nations at its core’ (p.15), the EU argued that - unified- it had ‘the potential to deliver security, prosperity and democracy to its citizens and make a positive difference in the world’ (p.16). Engagement with and responsibility to its range of global partners were cited as tools by which the EU could actively promote its influence, making clear not only the

need 'to respond responsibly yet decisively to crises, facilitate locally owned agreements, and commit long-term', but more importantly, to 'take responsibility foremost in Europe and its surrounding regions, while pursuing targeted engagement further afield', with a particular focus on 'champion[ing] the indivisibility and universality of human rights (p.18).' Equally however, the Global Strategy is clear that all such endeavours are collaborative in essence, requiring its partners to invest in 'resilience' i.e., ongoing reform of states and societies, particularly if recovering from the trauma of internal upheaval or external crises 1. European External Action Service, "A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy" (2016). In what is perhaps the clearest statement of the entire text, the Global Strategy asserts simply:

Together with its partners, the EU will therefore promote resilience in its surrounding regions. A resilient state is a secure state, and security is key for prosperity and democracy. But the reverse holds true as well (24).

Moving to the political economy challenges, the concern has been the way the EU can prevent the appropriation of national resources by dominating political elites and how the EU can support the development of a liberal economic environment where businesses can operate and cooperate with the EU. On a number of occasions, the dominant elites have used state instruments to intervene in the economy for their own gains, stifling the private entrepreneurial initiatives or have used other international actors (such as Russia, China and the Middle Eastern countries) to bring in foreign investment with no strings attached and with a promise of allegiance or support for their ... in power. Issues of transparency and accountability become apparent in this case, as deals can happen behind closed doors, without the public of these countries ever finding out.

Finally, in terms of the social and cultural challenges, the EU faced the challenge of legitimacy. The longer a country deviates from processes of democratisation, the deeper ideas around the legitimacy of autocracy become. The EU then appears as a competitor of power within a country and a process of re-socialisation into democratic norms and principles needs to restart (Kobzova 2014). This challenge demonstrates the need to engage with the grassroots civil society actors to keep the demand and support for democracy alive, otherwise the EU becomes an easy scapegoat in the local narrative. Hence, the challenge requires a response of maintaining the route to democracy as the alternative norm but also the norm that is a qualitatively different social and civil environment that governs citizens-state relations. In that sense, the EU has only just started to emphasize projects that involve vulnerable social groups, minority groups and empowering small and medium-sized enterprises and youth groups to engage with it. Such groups are the least defended by the state in the region and frequently become scapegoats in their political narratives. Those voices tend to be suppressed or intentionally marginalised to avoid growing opposition and pressures towards the political elites.

The EU has an array of different tools to confront these challenges that go well beyond the classic checklists that the EU has been producing via its current democracy support strategies. In that context, the current strategy may have contained the right keywords however to a certain extent, have they been fit for purpose in terms of their objectives, their measurable key performance indicators and the targeted impact they may have—equally in terms of non-compliance, what are the implications when the countries on the receiving end do not seem to adhere or honour certain agreements. This may have happened in countries like Belarus, where the drift with the EU is an obvious fact, but that has not manifested to that degree with non-action by the rest of the neighbourhood countries. This has not entirely been the EU's fault, as the geopolitical challenges since the early 2000s in terms of conflict, terrorism and regional foci have shifted priorities away from the eastern neighbourhood (e.g., the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the elevated migration flows, the issues around radicalisation). Good governance seemed to be an agenda that was ticking the boxes for the EU and was easy to implement considering its experience of it within its own member states and its OECD commitments.

Given these challenges, there have been occasions where the EU has been effective in promoting aspects of democratisation. Starting with the challenge of security, the region has been quite diverse in the degree that each country had a need to rely on the EU as an international security actor. In this case, for countries relying

on the EU's role in the balancing of the security environment the expectations may have been extremely high but the actual capability (or willingness to engage) may have been low. Here countries like Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia may have been placing too much faith in the EU. On the other hand, countries that were closer to other international security actors may not have looked at the EU to provide this element of security (for instance, those closer to Russia (Belarus, Armenia) or Turkey (Azerbaijan)).

Second Karabakh war of 2020 and forcibly displaced Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia in 2023, the unresolved conflicts of Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia are not only a threat to European integration, but also, going beyond this framework, pose a threat to the entire EaP region both politically and economic level. It should be noted that economic relations that are completely absent between Azerbaijan and Armenia not only leave their negative reflection on the economies of the two states, but, in general, in the entire region. The issue of resolving these two multi-layered conflicts is complicated by the fact that the positions of the parties involved in the conflict are completely opposite, and neither party to the conflict at this stage of the negotiations is ready to make serious compromises and concessions that would lead to a future resolution of the conflict. Added to this are the complex relations of the parties involved in their settlement, especially in the Transnistrian, Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts, which are in the sphere of interests of the EU, USA and Russia.

## 5 Strategic Insights into EU Democracy Support in EaP countries: SWOT Analysis

SWOT analysis is one of the effective strategic planning tools that evaluates various phenomena (organization, process, country, policy etc.) according to 4 main components: strengths and weaknesses, as well as opportunities and threats, which make up the acronym. Strengths and weaknesses are associated predominantly with the internal environment, that is, with the resource base of the object under study, while opportunities and threats are associated primarily with the structuring of the situation and external environmental factors SWOT (Benzaghta et al. 2021; Gürel and Tat 2017).

Although the method was originally developed and used in the field of business management, today it has gone beyond this scope and has been successfully adapted to many other areas. In this sense, it is one of the most flexible methods with wide possibilities for comprehensive assessment.

However, the main advantage of SWOT analysis is not only a systematic analysis of the object under study according to the above characteristics, but also a comprehensive consideration of the strengths/weaknesses of the object through the prism of opportunities/threats. This is done using a special SWOT analysis matrix (TOWS matrix), which is sometimes also called the primary strategic analysis matrix (Wehrich 1982, 59-61; Fred 2011, 178-181). It serves an additional analysis of the object under study, where at the intersection of four sections four additional fields are formed, which make it possible to consider the characteristics of the object in different combinations. The important field is the “Opportunities and Strengths”, which determines the most promising, strategic vector of development. It indicates how strengths can be leveraged to realize the opportunities. “Threats and Weaknesses” field demonstrates the “weak link” of the object, the most vulnerable aspects of its position. In this context, it guides how threats can be prevented from being realized through the weaknesses. The “Opportunities and Weaknesses” field demonstrates how weak positions can be compensated for by new opportunities. The “Strengths and Threats” field allows you to better understand how resource advantages can be used to eliminate threats.

The analysis within this section reviews the EU democracy support achievements and challenges of the past years in light of the SWOT analysis identifying various aspects that facilitated these successes or caused difficulties. To better understand EU democracy support strategies in EaP countries, this analysis also examines the interplay between strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Its goal is to provide insights on leveraging strengths to seize opportunities, addressing weaknesses, and preventing threats from impeding progress towards a more democratic and prosperous Eastern Partnership.

**Strengths:** Building Blocks for Democratic Progress. The strengths of EU democracy support in the Eastern Partnership countries encompass their inherent resources and circumstances leading to progress in democratic values and practices. As shown in Table 4 of the Appendix these strengths include vibrant civil society in Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine, and civil society abroad in Azerbaijan and Belarus. The signing and implementation of Association Agreements with Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova represent important milestone achievements towards European integration, supported by strong public backing for the European path. The latter also indicates the level of cooperation and initiatives to bring legislative practices into line with EU standards in Moldova (European Commission 2023a; 2023d), Ukraine (European Commission 2023b; 2023e) and Georgia (European Commission 2023c; Council of Europe 2023; 2019), confirming the commitment of these countries to democratic reforms. As for Armenia, similar initiatives are being taken within the framework of CEPA, with some limitations, especially in connection with Armenia’s membership and obligations in the Eurasian Economic Union. And despite these restrictions, Armenia has declared its commitment to cooperation with the EU in a wide range of areas (freedom, security, economy, justice, etc.), thereby strengthening the rule of law, good governance and respect for human rights (Delegation of the European Union to Armenia n.d.). We can also assert a strong public trust in the EU in the case of Armenia. Public opinion surveys indicate that the European Union has a 60% level of public trust, which is the highest among other international organizations (EU NEIGHBOURS East 2023; CRRM Armenia 2021). Noticeable

progress has taken place in electoral processes in Moldova and Armenia (European Parliament 2021; Council of the European Union 2021). It is worth noting that Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia continue to make efforts to achieve progress in the areas of governance and the rule of law (European Commission 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; European Parliament 2023a). Due to visa liberalization and facilitation strategies, countries of Associated Trio and Armenia have registered an increase in the level of mobility. According to the Eastern Partnership Index 2021 (EaP CSF n.d.), Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine received 1 point and Armenia 0.75 points for Mobility (including academic and student mobility) on a scale of 0 to 1.

**Opportunities:** Paths to Strengthen Democracy. The opportunities highlighted in this analysis represent ways that can facilitate the development of democratic basis in EaP countries. Table 4 (see Appendix) also presents the opportunities that come from EU projects and instruments aimed at supporting democracy. According to the methodology, the table shows the available, provided opportunities, but the levels of their use and non-use in general can vary greatly depending on the case and time. And it is the level of operating of these opportunities that determines the level of good governance and democracy promotion. Thus the projects aimed at business (e.g. GreenHouse for Social Innovators – Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine), social entrepreneurship (Building Back Better Through Social Entrepreneurship – Associated Trio) and trade relations (EU4Business: Eastern Partnership Trade Helpdesk-EaP6) development, economic growth (EU4Business Facility (Phase III), ICAP Phase II - Associated Trio, Armenia, Azerbaijan) and infrastructural development (Structural Reform Facility-EaP6) have potential to improve prosperity as a whole, while the capacity building (TAIEX), improvement in public financial management lays ground for the sound governance. Projects aimed at strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law, expanding human rights, and promoting regional cooperation (Governance Progress Board for the Eastern Partnership Countries; PGG III: Partnership for Good Governance; Eastern Partnership Civil Society Facility - EaP6) are key drivers for democracy development. These and other opportunities presented in the table offer avenues for stimulating trade and economic integration, fostering regional cooperation, promoting gender equality and enhancing transparency and accountability in the age of globalization, international mobility, and digital connectivity. This allows for the making of further moves towards common democratic objectives by access to EU funding as well as expertise and extended political dialogue.

**Weaknesses:** Challenges to Overcome. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the democratic transformation in EaP countries involves several challenges and deficiencies. Democratization is hampered by the limited capacity and limited engagement of stakeholders such as NGOs, local authorities and the private sector. Expectations in terms of institutional capacities and reforms within public administration, justice and law enforcement have often not been met in Associated Trio and Armenia (European Commission 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; European Parliament 2023a). Authoritarian and repressive government, restrictions and violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, oppression of civil society, arrests of activists, human rights defenders and journalists, restrictions on media pluralism and freedom of expression and many other issues remain the main challenges to democratization in Azerbaijan and Belarus (European Parliament 2023b; 2023c). Thus, scarce resources, lack of government support, and resistance to change further pose significant barriers in all EaP countries with varying levels of impact. Furthermore, the lack of public awareness coupled with socioeconomic challenges (especially in Moldova, Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine) such as high unemployment (World Bank n.d.-a), poverty (World Bank n.d.-b; United Nations in Ukraine 2023) and inequality in income distribution (World Bank n.d.-c) have significantly hindered the potential for democratic reform. Despite efforts and even some progress to combat corruption in some countries, it remains one of the main obstacles to democratic reforms and democratization in the EaP countries. According to Transparency International, Belarus and Azerbaijan saw a significant decline in the Corruption Perceptions Index of 7-10 points from 2020 to 2023, amounting to 37 and 23 respectively on a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 means the highest level of corruption and 100 the lowest. At the same time, among 180 countries of the world, Azerbaijan is 154th in terms of corruption. In recent years, only Moldova has made significant progress in anti-corruption indicators. Although in 2023, with a score of 42 points, Moldova is still in 76th place among 180 countries and 3rd among the EaP countries. Even though only Georgia has recorded a decrease in scores within the countries of Associated Trio in 2023 compared to the previous year, among the Eastern Partnership countries, Georgia still has the highest score (53), followed by Armenia with 47 points. Ukraine has 36 points and ranks 104 among 180 countries (Transparency International 2022; 2023).

Thus, corruption issues and the persistence of weak governance only exacerbates these concerns, while a dearth of political will, political polarization and widespread public scepticism adds to the complications. Moreover, ineffective coordination efforts, internal political strife, and bureaucratic hurdles further impede progress.

**Threats: Navigating Risks to Democracy.** In addition to their inherent weaknesses, EaP countries face external threats that can undermine their aspirations for democracy. As highlighted in Table 4 of the Appendix, these threats include political instability, conflicts, geopolitical tensions, and diverging paths towards integration. From a geopolitical point of view, the region is under great tension and instability. Five of the six Eastern Partnership countries have territorial conflicts. Moreover, two of them are members of the Eastern Partnership. The war in Ukraine has led to an incredible escalation of the situation and new threats on a global scale. The varying levels of democracy among these countries add further complexity, while economic challenges and interference from third parties also pose significant concerns. Harmonizing regional goals is a challenge due to cultural and traditional differences, as well as compliance issues related to EU regulations. Additionally, there are specific threats that need constant preparedness, including irregular migrants, military actions, and force majeure situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. The risk of political polarization, economic and political dependence on Russia, and concerns about authoritarianism and democracy backsliding further highlight the delicate nature of democratization and democratic progress.

In addition, Tables 4-8 (Appendix) also presents the intersection of the 4 main directions. Specifically, how strengths and opportunities can mitigate weaknesses and threats or how strengths can be leveraged to realise the opportunities.

**Leveraging Strengths to Realize Opportunities for Democracy and Governance (S-O).** As was highlighted the strengths indicated in the SWOT analysis matrices (Table 4-8, Appendix) can be effectively leveraged to realize various opportunities to promote democracy and good governance in the EaP countries. In this context public trust and confidence in the legislative process and good governance is an essential basis for strengthening democratic institutions, promoting transparency and improving governance practices. Alignment of legislative practices with EU standards in Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Armenia facilitates opportunities for improving the legal framework and promoting EU best practices, ensuring compliance with European standards. Increased mobility in EaP countries fosters international networking, cultural exchange and community development, encouraging cross-border cooperation and supporting local initiatives. In addition, the signing and implementation of Association Agreements provide comprehensive frameworks for reforms and integration, directly supporting opportunities for EU integration, economic growth and trade. Such strengths as public support for EU integration and aspirations for it across Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova demonstrate a commitment to democratic values and closer cooperation with the EU, while progress in electoral processes, governance and the rule of law strengthen democratic institutions and human rights allowing access to EU funding and expertise. Finally, anti-corruption efforts in these countries are critical for enhancing transparency and accountability, business development and promoting economic growth and investments.

**Opportunities to Minimize or Mitigate Weaknesses (O-W).** Opportunities in the sphere of business development and economic growth are important initiatives to address socio-economic challenges reducing unemployment and poverty as well as fostering economic resilience. Efforts aimed at capacity building and improving of public financial management offer solutions to overcome institutional weaknesses in crucial sectors like public administration, judiciary and law enforcement, mitigating corruption and governance issues. Such opportunities as improved communication, networking and regional integration initiatives mitigate gaps in government cooperation and can help to overcome political conflicts, fostering a more cohesive community environment. Cross-border cooperation and regional development programs in their turn address infrastructure challenges and enhance border security. In addition, promoting good governance, the rule of law and transparency reduces resistance to change and fights corruption, while protecting human rights, democracy and gender equality can prevent democratic backsliding and discrimination. Access to EU funds and expertise is a valuable opportunity to address limitations in resources and technical obstacles. Moreover, EU best practices can mitigate limited capacity and engagement of

stakeholders. And finally, the integration into the European education and research area contributes to the development of human capital and promotes human rights reforms.

**Mitigating Threats through Strengths (S-T).** Public support for EU integration is an important tool that can mitigate external interference and reduce the negative influence of third actors. In this context it is worth mentioning that EU integration aspirations of Armenia signal a readiness for new political and economic projects, which can mitigate economic and political dependence on Russia. Another threat is that EaP countries have different levels of democracy that create some disbalance in EU integration and regional cooperation perspectives. Especially progress in electoral processes, governance and the rule of law as well as anti-corruption better efforts in Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova can mitigate these issues fostering greater political cohesion and stability within the region. Increased mobility in mentioned countries can moderate cultural/traditional differences between EaP countries that hinder democratic promotion. As for Azerbaijan and Belarus, their civil society abroad plays an important part in working with inner society and promoting EU values mitigating anti-European ideological streams. Azerbaijani and Belarusian civil society organizations abroad have also played a great role in drawing international attention to authoritarian practices, human rights violations and irregular migrants' issues in their countries. They can exert pressure on their governments for democratic reforms.

**Preventing threats from being realized through the weaknesses (W-T).** Activities aimed at preventing threats that can be realized through weaknesses are an essential step in strategic planning (see Tables 4-8, Appendix). Threats such as external interference or negative influence from third parties can be addressed through the strengthening capacity and engagement of stakeholders. And a strong and vibrant civil society and local authorities play an important role in resisting external pressure. Moreover, increased coordination and government cooperation can in turn strengthen resistance to external interference and improve internal resilience in the Eastern Partnership countries. Addressing threats associated with political instability can be achieved by strengthening institutional capacity in the areas of public administration, justice and law enforcement, which will improve the effectiveness of responding to political challenges. Increased government support for EU activities and closer mutual cooperation has a significant potential to reduce internal divisions and vulnerabilities that can be exploited by external actors during times of geopolitical tension. Meanwhile, addressing weak governance and corruption can improve economic resilience and mitigate the impact of external economic challenges. In addition, ensuring the independence of the judiciary is a critical issue and is essential to uphold the rule of law and meet EU standards, thereby preventing compliance problems.

## 6 Strategic Insights into EU Democracy Support in EaP countries: SWOT Analysis Case highlights – Country spotlights

### 6.1 Belarus

The EU's democracy promotion activities through the EaP have faced numerous hurdles, even before the elections in Belarus in August 2020, which resulted in the government's crackdown of protesters and the jailing of opposition leaders and supporters, with others fleeing the country. From 2010 through to 2020, there has been an emphasis on twinning agreements between Belarus and the EU in several areas, including with various government ministries as well as a focus on human rights, irregular migration and good governance. We can also see projects initiated in the areas of the environment, youth, COVID-19 response, trade and gender equality, the latter through the EU4gender equality programme.

However, despite many of these projects including interaction with the Belarusian authorities, cooperation has been difficult due to the Government viewing EU funded projects with suspicion leading to delays, along with its attitude towards civil society and international cooperation, which could be hostile and repressive, and its reticence to enter into meaningful dialogue regarding human rights. This is combined with resource/capacity and finance issues, difficulties in cooperation between different stakeholders and public attitude and awareness on various aspects, particularly concerning migrants and human rights. Evidently the EU's engagement was based on allowing a transfer of knowledge from the EU to Belarus, making EU values visible, strengthening the Belarussian government's institutional capacity, enhancing cross-cultural understanding and raising awareness of various issues. However, it is evident that the EU's EaP engagement faced difficulties in overcoming the various challenges listed above.

The EU created the 'EU4Belarus: Solidarity with the people of Belarus' programme in December 2020. Whilst many of the projects prior to this included a civil society component, this project focuses on the people of Belarus rather than having any contact with government. Hence there is support for civil society and independent media, Belarussian youth including a scholarship programme, advisory support to small medium sized enterprises (SMEs), health resilience, support for businesses in exile and support for culture and the arts including artists abroad. Thus, the EU has moved towards trying to promote democracy support in a bottom-up way, rather than through a focus on changing government structures, values and views.

It is important to note that the Belarusian government suspended the readmission agreement in June 2021, and the EU suspended the EaP programme with Belarus also in the same year. However, as highlighted above, the EU's engagement with the Belarussian authorities had already been challenging. Hence, whilst it is clear that official relations have deteriorated in connection to the EaP, at the same time the EU is continuing to show a commitment to the people of Belarus.

In 2020, against the backdrop of opposition protests after the presidential elections, the political elite of Belarus adopted a new strategy for conducting an anti-Western policy, and the Belarusian military was involved in measures to strengthen the protection of the western border. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Belarus became part of Russia's anti-European and anti-Western policies. The new political tasks of the EU are directly related to changes in responsibility within European and international organizations dealing with European security issues in the EaP space. After 2022, Belarus and other EaP countries took certain steps to adapt to new conditions, but not all of them turned out to be adequate to the changed situation. Russia's efforts to isolate Belarus from the EU EaP succeeded, as Russia's tactical nuclear weapons were stationed in Belarus, which is a violation of the international obligations of both Russia and Belarus.

## 6.2 Ukraine

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine initiated a long-term path towards closer ties with the European Union. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, established in the late 1990s, marked the commencement of bilateral relations, which were significantly expanded by the Eastern Partnership initiative in 2009. Yanukovich's deferral of the EU Association Agreement in 2013, failed against the robust public support for European integration manifest in the Euromaidan protests, represented a critical juncture in Ukraine's political and societal evolution. These developments not only highlighted the populace's commitment to European values but also led to notable geopolitical shifts, including Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ensuing war in Eastern Ukraine, impacting Ukraine's direction towards Euro-Atlantic integration. However, Kyiv's calls for a credible membership perspective, which were first voiced in the 1990s already, were never fully reciprocated by Brussels until after the large-scale Russian invasion in 2022.

In response to these challenges, the European Union enhanced its support for Ukraine, affirming the nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and promoting a comprehensive agenda for reforms in governance, rule of law, and anti-corruption initiatives. Ukraine was already before the large-scale war the EU's biggest recipient of aid outside the bloc. It was also the only country where most of the aid was distributed through MFA programmes, highlighting the importance of the leverage channel in the relations between Brussels and Kyiv.

The implementation of the Association Agreement and Ukraine's participation in the EU's DCFTA have been pivotal in integrating its economy with that of the European market, fostering economic reforms and resilience. Despite these advancements, Ukraine continued to face significant obstacles, including the necessity for profound democratic reforms, combating corruption, and addressing the humanitarian and security impacts of the ongoing conflict. The EU's strategy, influenced by the 'more for more' principle, links the level of cooperation and assistance to the progress of Ukraine's reforms, emphasizing the conditional nature of its engagement, although not always adhering to follow through on its formal commitments. This is because geopolitical considerations have often overshadowed others as Ukraine was and is in a special geopolitical setting.

## 6.3 Moldova

Moldova, since its independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has faced considerable challenges, including the repercussions of the Transnistrian conflict and the influence of pro-Russian actors within its political landscape. These elements have collectively shaped Moldova's journey towards European Union integration, posing both hurdles and catalysts for reform. Amidst these complexities, Moldova's strategic decision to forge a closer relationship with the European Union was formalized through the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in the mid-1990s. This foundational treaty laid the groundwork for enhanced political and economic relations, setting the stage for Moldova's active engagement in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative introduced by the EU in 2009.

The geopolitical landscape of Moldova, marked by the ongoing influence of pro-Russian factions and the distinct status of the Gagauzia region, has necessitated a nuanced approach to its European integration process. Despite these challenges, the signing of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in 2014 represented significant milestones, underscoring Moldova's commitment to aligning with European standards and regulations. These agreements have facilitated substantial reforms across various sectors, including governance, the rule of law, and economic policies, fostering a closer integration of Moldova's market with the European Union. However, under its pro-Russian president, Igor Dodon, the country became an observer of the EAEU in 2017, highlighting the balancing act of some Moldovan governments.

Yet, under the leadership of its western-minded president, Maia Sandu, Moldova has embarked on an ambitious reform agenda, signalling a renewed emphasis on European integration and democratic governance. President Sandu's administration has prioritized anti-corruption measures, judicial reforms, and the strengthening of democratic institutions, aligning closely with the EU's 'more for more' principle, which ties the depth of bilateral cooperation to tangible progress in reforms.

## 6.4 Georgia

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia established the closest relations with the European Union among the South Caucasus republics. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), signed back in 1996, became the first international agreement between the EU and Georgia, aimed not only at deepening financial and economic cooperation but also serving as a legal basis for strengthening political dialogue and developing democracy. In this regard, favourable conditions were created in 2004, when Georgia became a beneficiary of the European Neighbourhood Policy and TACIS was replaced by the ENPI. Moreover, Georgia became a co-founder of the intergovernmental organisation 'Community of Democratic Choice'. Thanks to this policy, official Tbilisi not only took part in creating an alternative to the CIS but also took steps to give new impetus to the GUAM Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development.

However, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War was a turning point in EU-Georgia relations. The conflict, which broke out at the height of the Great Recession, radically changed both Georgia's foreign policy and the foreign and security policies of the EU. For the first time in the history of post-Soviet space, an EU peacekeeping mission was deployed in the South Caucasus, and Georgia became a member of the EaP initiative. Greater opportunities for Georgia's European integration opened after the EaP Summit in Vilnius, when the Association Agreement was officially signed in 2014. Along with the political association, the agreement also envisaged the establishment of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. Thus, Georgia received the opportunity to integrate into the European internal market in certain sectors. From the point of view of privileged relations, no less important was that a year later, the EU granted Georgian citizens the possibility of visa-free entry and movement within the Schengen area. In essence, Georgia was able to benefit as much as possible from the EU's differentiated policies to encourage neighbouring countries.

Given the fact that the 'more for more' principle was applied by the EU in cases where a partner country was building a strong and stable democracy based on the rule of law, Georgia followed the path of institutional reforms, enshrining full integration into the EU as a priority in the Constitution (Article 78) and the Foreign Policy Strategy. To this end, Georgia attached particular importance to cooperation with Eastern European countries that share the national vision of European integration, seeking to expand the possibilities of EU Association Agreements. As a practical step, Georgia formed the Association Trio with Ukraine and Moldova to coordinate cooperation and enhance common interests between the three countries and the EU.

It is noteworthy that, in contrast to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, which destroyed Russian-Georgian political relations, the Ukrainian War of 2022 forced Georgia to de facto reconsider its relations with official Moscow. Although Georgia applied for EU membership after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it cautiously stepped up dialogue with the Russian side, causing serious disagreements with Ukraine. In this context, considering the possibility of Georgia's rapprochement with Russia on the one hand and the obvious aspirations of Georgian citizens for European integration on the other hand, on December 14, 2023, Georgia was granted candidate status by the European Council. With this move, the EU not only encouraged Georgia once again, bringing it one step closer to the EU, but also demonstrated that the EaP is not an alternative to EU integration and stems from the EU's enlargement policy.

## 6.5 Armenia

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, due to security threats, Armenia was included in Russia-led integration initiatives (CIS, CSTO). However, the restoration of independence allowed official Yerevan to

establish close ties with the EU based on common cultural values. The first step was the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) signed in 1996, which came into force in 1999.

Armenia-EU relations received a new impetus in 2003, when the post of EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus was established, and a year later Armenia became part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The further development of relations between Armenia and the EU was determined by a number of regional and geopolitical factors.

The 2008 Russo-Georgian War had a significant impact not only on changing Georgia's foreign policy but also largely prompted neighbouring countries to adjust their security policies. Given the precedent of Russia's return to the South Caucasus with military force, in the autumn of 2008, Armenia began negotiations with Turkey, trying to achieve the opening of the Armenian-Turkish border and the establishment of diplomatic relations. Although the Zurich Protocols were finally signed on October 10, 2009, thanks to active mediation efforts by the US, France, and the EU, the agreements were never ratified by the countries' national assemblies, due to preconditions imposed by Turkey. In subsequent years, the failure of the process of normalising bilateral relations left a deep mark on the foreign and security policy of Armenia, depriving official Yerevan of the opportunity to pursue a multi-vector policy.

From the point of view of foreign policy diversification, participation in the EaP initiative in 2009 became a new window of opportunity for Armenia. Since then, Armenia has been benefiting from the EU's Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance (GSP+).

In July 2010, Armenia and the EU commenced intensive negotiations on the Association Agreement, which also included the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreement. Although the negotiations ended successfully and Armenia and the EU agreed on the Association Agreement before the Vilnius Summit, in September 2013, the Armenian government withdrew from the association process, declaring its readiness to join the Customs Union and later to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). This decision, which caused discontent among the opposition and a significant part of the public, was quite unexpected, since the Armenian authorities had not previously advocated joining the EEU. Moreover, Armenia did not participate in the creation of the EEU and joined the Union as a non-founding member only in October 2014.

Negotiations on a renewed framework agreement between Armenia and the EU began in 2015, leading to the signing of the Armenia-EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in Brussels in 2017. Replacing the PCA and becoming a solid legal basis, the CEPA expanded the scope of bilateral relations between Armenia and the EU, covering a wide range of cooperation, from human rights and the fight against corruption to energy and security issues. In this regard, the 2018 Velvet Revolution was a turning point in Armenia-EU relations, as for the first time in the history of post-Soviet Armenia, democracy was proclaimed not as a geopolitical choice but as a value orientation.

In the conditions of rethinking socio-political priorities, Armenia-EU relations entered a completely new phase in terms of creating an atmosphere of mutual trust, large-scale democratic reforms, legal cooperation, and strengthening the rule of law. In accordance with the Programme of the Government of the Republic of Armenia, approved in February 2019, the implementation of the CEPA was considered a significant factor in promoting the agenda of reforms aimed at the development of Armenia (Chapter II, paragraph 2.3). As a strategic document, the CEPA became the main instrument of Armenia-EU cooperation aimed at carrying out systemic reforms in the fields of stable democracy, good governance, and judicial independence, as well as gradually bringing the legal system and regulations of Armenia in line with the EU's *acquis communautaire*.

Thanks to the agreement, Armenia has de facto moved one step forward in terms of political and economic association with the EU. It is not at all surprising that in December 2019, the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly adopted a resolution on the future of the EaP, putting into circulation the 'Trio+1' concept, which, in addition to the Association Trio, also considered the aspirations of Armenia.

The 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh did not have a negative impact on the further development of Armenia-EU relations. Along with official Moscow and Washington, the EU became a mediator in the negotiations on a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moreover, by decision of the EU Council in January 2023, a two-year EU observation mission was deployed in several locations on the territory of Armenia, thereby playing an important role in ensuring the security of its South Caucasian partner.

## 6.6 Azerbaijan

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has established a pragmatic dialogue with the EU and closely cooperates in the political, economic, and especially energy spheres. Bilateral relations were formalised in 1996 with the signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which came into force in 1999 and laid the legal basis for multi-level cooperation between Azerbaijan and the EU.

Wider opportunities for bilateral cooperation were created in 2004, when Azerbaijan was included in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Based on the PCA, in 2006 the EU-Azerbaijan Cooperation Council adopted a joint Action Plan aimed at cooperation with Azerbaijan in all key areas of reforms. However, given the scale of the Eastern European dimension, a broader and multi-sectoral relationship between the EU and Azerbaijan was only institutionalised in 2009, when Azerbaijan became a member of the EaP initiative. Even though in subsequent years Azerbaijan did not consider it advisable to sign the Association Agreement and move towards European integration, it continued to look for common areas of cooperation, emphasising the pan-European importance of expanding the Southern Gas Corridor and modernising the energy infrastructure with EU support.

Although both parties are well aware that the PCA reached more than 20 years ago does not correspond to current realities and have been intensively negotiating a renewed and upgraded framework agreement since February 2017, the ambitious foreign policy priorities of Azerbaijan regularly create obstacles to reaching a consensus. The reason is that, unlike other EaP member countries, Azerbaijan has never given preference to standardised agreements and commitments to the EU. 'Caviar diplomacy', first described by the European Stability Initiative (ESI) in 2012, and 'Azerbaijani Laundromat', revealed by the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) in September 2017, have also left a negative mark on the breakdown of mutual trust in the political relations between Azerbaijan and the EU.

However, Azerbaijan and the EU are successfully cooperating in the energy sector. The EU perceives the Caspian resources of Azerbaijan as an alternative to Russian energy carriers and attaches great importance to diversifying suppliers and reducing energy dependence. The foundations for this format of relations were laid back in 2006, when a Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy was concluded between the EU and Azerbaijan, and the EU committed itself to reforming and modernising the domestic energy sector of Azerbaijan.

In 2014, significant progress was made on several bilateral agreements, such as the entry into force of the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement as well as the signing of the additional Protocol to the PCA on Azerbaijan's participation in selected EU programmes and agencies. However, energy security issues remained at the core of Azerbaijan-EU relations. It is not surprising that after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU softened its rhetoric about human rights abuses in Azerbaijan and rushed to sign a new agreement designed to prevent an EU energy crisis. On July 18, 2022, the EU and Azerbaijan signed a new Memorandum of Understanding on a strategic partnership in the field of energy, which includes the commitment to double the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor by a minimum of 20 billion cubic metres for the EU annually by 2027.

Despite the lack of political association, Azerbaijan remains one of the most important partners of the EU, as Baku has adopted a strategy of becoming a green and renewable energy hub, expecting EU support. In this

context, on December 17, 2022, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, and Hungary signed an agreement to build an electric cable under the Black Sea to transport green Azerbaijani energy to Europe as part of wider EU efforts to diversify energy resources away from Russia.

## 7 Executive conclusion

Global trends in recent years portend a deepening of democratic crisis. Research aimed at measuring the level and the quality of democracy shows the global democratic backsliding (Economist Intelligence Unit 2023; 2022; Boese et al. 2022; Papada et al. 2023). In this sense, the new reality highlights the need to develop new approaches to promoting democracy around the world. The EU, as a stakeholder and strong player in support of democracy, has also come across the challenge of countering democratic decline and authoritarian influence and has recognized the need to develop new tools and approaches to strengthen support for democracy and resistance to authoritarianism (Zamfir 2021).

This working paper, having an aim to provide an overview and critical analysis of EU democracy support actions towards the Eastern Neighbourhood in a longitudinal perspective, delves into the fluid terrain of democracy support projects and strategies employed by the EU, with an emphasis on the years between 2010 and 2022.

The EU's commitment to promoting democracy, good governance and prosperity in its Eastern Neighbourhood is reflected by the launching of the Eastern Partnership initiative in 2009. Since then, the EU has consistently adapted its strategy, as seen in the review processes post-2011, particularly after the 2015 EaP Summit. The focus changed to a smaller number of priorities carrying higher differentiation and shared tasks among Member States. The incentive-based 'more for more' approach along with the focus on 'deep and sustainable democracy' also reflect a strategic turn. Finally, 2016 EU Global Strategy was a transformative understanding that started to focus on state and societal resilience as critical for success. In addition, the EU Global Strategy and the '20 Deliverables for 2020' focus on the principles of openness, participation, accountability and effectiveness, which are fundamental components of good governance and democracy promotion and is an important basis for this working paper.

The paper also analyses the principles of good governance based on the World Governance Indicators allowing for a comparative analysis of the progress of the Eastern Partnership countries and the new EU Member States/NMS in achieving democracy. Thus, in terms of good governance indicators, Georgia stood out by outperforming the NMS anti-corruption average. Armenia and Moldova showed mixed results, with specific indicators improving after 2018. Ukraine has stagnated since the mid-2010s, while Belarus and Azerbaijan have seen declines in some indicators.

The findings, based on the analysis of the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index (Polyarchy Index), led to the conclusions that the EaP countries can be divided into three groups in the context of democratic progress. The first group included Armenia and Moldova, whose indices approached the average level of the NMS and even exceeded it by the 2020s. The second group includes Ukraine, which, having experienced fluctuations in the indicators of electoral democracy, has not approached the levels of the NMS. In this sense, Georgia can also be included in this group, but the results on the index in recent years are significantly higher than those of Ukraine. In addition, Ukraine is the only country whose biggest period of decline occurred immediately after the launch of the EaP. Finally, the third group, consisting of Belarus and Azerbaijan, remained authoritarian with minor variations.

Analysing the EU's democracy support instruments, procedures, financial assistance and non-financial instruments becomes clear that the EU's approach is multifaceted, including both inducive and enforcing instruments, with a notable emphasis on conditionality and financial assistance associated with democratic reforms. Study on the total inducive EU aid ('monetary transfers [e.g., grants and loans to governments and projects], non-monetary transfers [e.g., food aid, technical cooperation] and support that did not contain any additional transfer of resources [e.g., debt relief]) revealed that financial aid has variations in per-capita support among EaP countries, with Ukraine (especially as an Associated country) standing out as a clear outlier. Meanwhile, the examination of inducing instruments through the lens of SDG, shows a relatively low level of democracy-related aid, compared to those for other policy areas which is in accordance with general

studies on EU democracy support. Assessing the enforcement instruments (through the MFAs) at the financial level, we are faced with a different picture. In terms of enforcing aid, Ukraine is in the first place, both in absolute values and per capita. In this sense, Ukraine is an outstanding example where the enforcing category exceeds inductive assistance in absolute terms. This is due to the conditions associated with MFA programs, indicating a significant focus on governance reforms.

In terms of coherence, the EaP policy reveals challenges both in the sectoral and in the temporal dimension. Geopolitical factors, especially rivalry with Russia, add inconsistency to efforts to promote democracy. Consistency and traceability of benchmarks across periods require greater attention as an important factor in improving coherence.

It is worth noting that the effectiveness of the EaP policy in promoting democracy and good governance is questioned, with mixed outcomes observed across EaP countries. There are concerns about democracy backsliding processes, limited causal links between support and democratic change, and the connection of projects to broader goals. Although some positive impacts have been noted, overall effectiveness remains under scrutiny, especially in the context of varying progress and geopolitical dilemmas facing the EU.

The challenges of the EaP policy include the uncertain balance between standardized approaches and specific/individual measures corresponding to each country in its context. Political, economic and social issues, including illiberalism, resource appropriation and legitimacy issues pose significant obstacles. The EU is struggling to ensure security, prevent elite appropriation and manage transformations in regional and geopolitical priorities. While strengths such as vibrant civil societies and progress through Association Agreements are evident, challenges including limited stakeholder engagement, authoritarian obstacles, and political instability remain. Opportunities lie in EU projects fostering economic growth, strengthening democratic institutions, and developing regional cooperation. However, navigating threats like external interference or negative influence of third actors, conflicts, geopolitical tension, and specific risks demands continual preparedness. Balancing these dynamics is critical for democracy promotion in EaP countries. It requires a multidimensional response to address the diverse and evolving challenges in the region.

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## 9 APPENDIX

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Number of Projects commencing 2004 -2014</b>	<b>Number of Projects commencing 2015-2022</b>
Border management/cooperation	2	2
Civil Society	1	7
Climate and the environment	4	2
Combatting crime	0	8
Communication	0	3
Cultural	0	3
Cyber Security	0	1
Democracy (direct)	1	1
Digital	0	3
Energy	3	6
EU Funding	1	0
Finance/business	9	11
Gender	1	4
Health	0	3
Justice and Legal Reform	0	3
Overarching projects (ENP)	1	2
Media and journalism	0	3
Natural and manmade disasters	0	1
Statistical Data	0	1
Structural Reform	0	1
Student mobility and education	4	2
Transport	0	1
Water	0	2
Youth	0	3

<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>73</b>

**Table 3: EaP 6 Project Topics**

	<b>OPPORTUNITIES (O)</b>	<b>THREATS (T)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business development</li> <li>• Promotion of economic growth</li> <li>• Social entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Environmental protection and sustainability</li> <li>• Cultural exchange</li> <li>• Infrastructure development</li> <li>• Capacity building</li> <li>• Strengthening public financial management</li> <li>• Reforming public and civil services</li> <li>• Networking and partnership</li> <li>• Strengthening democratic institutions</li> <li>• Strengthening good governance practices</li> <li>• Strengthening rule of law</li> <li>• Promoting human rights and democracy</li> <li>• Improving legal framework</li> <li>• Promoting EU best practices</li> <li>• Enhancing transparency and accountability</li> <li>• International mobility</li> <li>• Youth initiatives</li> <li>• Regional cooperation</li> <li>• Enhancing trade and economic integration</li> <li>• Promotion of gender equality and non-discrimination</li> <li>• Access to the EU funding and expertise</li> <li>• Extended political dialogue between countries</li> <li>• Advocacy</li> <li>• Energy security</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political instability (external)</li> <li>• Conflict/war</li> <li>• Geopolitical tensions</li> <li>• Difference in integration paths</li> <li>• Different level of democracy among EaP members</li> <li>• Economic challenges (external factors, global crisis)</li> <li>• External interference or negative influence of third actors (e.g. Russia)</li> <li>• Cultural/traditional differences between EaP countries</li> <li>• Compliance issues with EU regulation standards</li> <li>• Irregular migrants (Belarus)</li> <li>• Military actions (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine)</li> <li>• Force majeure situations (e.g. Covid-19)</li> <li>• Economic and political dependence on Russia (Armenia, Belarus)</li> <li>• Anti-European ideology</li> <li>• Imposing sanctions on Belarus</li> <li>• Democratic backsliding of neighbouring country</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technical assistance</li> <li>• Investment opportunities</li> <li>• Fostering social inclusion</li> <li>• Cross-border cooperation and regional development, enhanced border security</li> <li>• Integration in the European education and research area</li> <li>• Development of human capital</li> <li>• Support for reforms</li> </ul>	
<p><b>STRENGTHS (S)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vibrant civil society (Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine)</li> <li>• Civil society abroad (Azerbaijan, Belarus)</li> <li>• Public trust and confidence in the legislative process and good governance (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia)</li> <li>• Alignment of legislative practices with EU standards (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia)</li> <li>• Increased mobility (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia)</li> <li>• Signing and implementation of the Association Agreement as a significant step toward EU integration (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia)</li> <li>• Public support for EU integration (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia)</li> <li>• EU integration aspiration (Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova)</li> </ul>	<p><b>S-O (Strengths leveraged to realize the opportunities)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public trust and confidence in the legislative process and good governance can directly support opportunities linked to strengthening democratic institutions, good governance practices and transparency. A trusted legislative process enhances the legitimacy of reforms</li> <li>• Alignment of legislative practices with EU standards in Georgia, Moldova and Armenia can facilitate opportunities such as improving the legal framework and promoting EU best practice. It ensures that laws and regulations are in line with European standards</li> <li>• Increased mobility (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia) enhances opportunities for international networking, cultural exchange and community development. It facilitates people-to-people interactions, encourages cross-border cooperation, and supports local initiatives</li> </ul>	<p><b>S-T (Mitigating Threats through Strengths)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public support for EU integration can be used to mitigate external interference or the negative influence of third actors (for e.g. Russia)</li> <li>• Progress in electoral processes, governance and the rule of law as well as anti-corruption efforts in Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova can mitigate the differences between levels of democracy</li> <li>• Azerbaijani and Belarusian civil society abroad (Azerbaijan, Belarus) can promote EU values working with inner society to mitigate anti-European ideological streams</li> <li>• Azerbaijani and Belarusian civil society organizations abroad can draw international attention to authoritarian practices, human rights violations, irregular migrants' issues and political instability in their countries. By doing so, they can exert pressure on their governments to pursue democratic reforms and improve political stability</li> <li>• Implementation of the Association Agreement and alignment of legislative</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress in electoral processes (Armenia, Moldova)</li> <li>• Efforts to achieve progress in the areas of governance and rule of law (Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova)</li> <li>• Youth Activism</li> <li>• Digital Activism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signing and implementation of the Association Agreements (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova) as comprehensive frameworks that provide a roadmap for reforms and integration correspond directly to opportunities for EU integration, economic growth and trade.</li> <li>• Public support for EU integration as well as EU integration aspirations (Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova) at the government level can be used to advance all spectrum of EU democracy support opportunities. It reflects a commitment to democratic values and closer cooperation</li> <li>• Progress in electoral processes, governance, and the rule of law in Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova can directly support opportunities related to strengthening democratic institutions, good governance practices, rule of law and human rights that also can bring to the access to EU funding and expertise</li> <li>• Anti-corruption efforts in Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova are essential to enhance transparency and accountability by aligning good governance practices with transparency opportunities. Reducing corruption can attract business growth and investment.</li> </ul>	<p>practices with EU standards will reduce problems with compliance issues with EU regulation standards</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased mobility (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia) can mitigate cultural/traditional differences between EaP countries</li> <li>• EU integration aspiration of Armenia shows its readiness for new political and economic projects, which can mitigate economic dependence on Russia</li> </ul>
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<b>WEAKNESSES</b>	<b>O-W (Opportunities to Minimize or Mitigate Weaknesses)</b>	<b>W-T (Preventing threats from being realized through the weaknesses)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited capacity and engagement of stakeholders (NGO, local authorities, private sector)</li> <li>• Limited institutional capacity (public administration, justice, and law enforcement)</li> <li>• Limited resources</li> <li>• Lack of government support</li> <li>• Limited government cooperation</li> <li>• Resistance to change</li> <li>• Limited public awareness / public perception</li> <li>• Social-economic challenges (unemployment, poverty)</li> <li>• Weak governance</li> <li>• Lack of political will</li> <li>• Public scepticism</li> <li>• Lack of coordination</li> <li>• Political tension (in-country)</li> <li>• Bureaucratic obstacles</li> <li>• Language barriers</li> <li>• Societal attitudes and culture</li> <li>• Social stigma, xenophobia and discrimination</li> <li>• Logistics, technical and infrastructural challenges</li> <li>• Legal constraints</li> <li>• Lack of independence of the judiciary</li> <li>• Democratic deficits</li> <li>• Lack of monitoring capacity</li> <li>• Issues in the implementation of human rights</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business development, economic growth and investment opportunities can help address socio-economic challenges such as unemployment and poverty, thereby reducing socio-economic vulnerabilities, through economic development and by improving performance</li> <li>• Building capacity, strengthening public financial management and improving public services can address the limited capacity of institutions in public administration, justice and law enforcement, and increase their effectiveness. Strengthening public finance can reduce corruption-related weaknesses and poor governance</li> <li>• Improved communication, networking opportunities and partnership, regional integration and border security can mitigate the weaknesses associated with lack of communication, lack of government cooperation, and political conflict within countries, as well as create a more cohesive community environment and strengthen advocacy efforts to protect civil society</li> <li>• Promoting good governance practices, the rule of law, transparency and accountability can help counter weaknesses associated with poor governance, lack of</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weakness: limited capacity and engagement of stakeholders (NGOs, local authorities, private sector)</li> </ul> <p>Threat: external interference or negative influence of third actors (e.g., Russia)</p> <p>Prevention: strengthening capacity and engagement of stakeholders can help countries to resist external intervention. A strong civil society and local authorities play an important role in protecting against external pressures.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weakness: limited institutional capacity (public administration, justice, and law enforcement)</li> </ul> <p>Threat: political instability</p> <p>Prevention: improving institutional capacity can enhance the ability of the government to maintain stability and to respond effectively to political challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weakness: limited government support and cooperation</li> </ul> <p>Threat: geopolitical tensions</p> <p>Prevention: stronger government support to EU activities and cooperation can reduce internal divisions and vulnerabilities that can be exploited by external actors during periods of geopolitical tensions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weakness: resistance to change and lack of political will</li> </ul> <p>Threat: democracy backsliding of neighbouring country:</p> <p>Prevention: overcoming resistance to change and encouraging political will decrease the negative influence of neighbouring country which is experiencing democracy backsliding; and ensuring continued democratic progress in the given country</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weakness: weak governance and corruption</li> </ul> <p>Threat: economic</p>

<p>reforms, particularly in the areas of freedom of expression, assembly, and association (Azerbaijan, Belarus)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repression of civil society organizations and human rights defenders, including arrests, detentions, and intimidation (Azerbaijan, Belarus)</li> <li>• Reports of torture (Azerbaijan, Belarus)</li> <li>• Discrimination and violence against marginalized groups, such as women, LGBTI individuals, and ethnic and religious minorities (Azerbaijan)</li> <li>• Corruption issues</li> <li>• Limited progress in improving transparency and accountability (Azerbaijan, Belarus)</li> <li>• Challenges related to the protection of refugees and asylum seekers, including the lack of a functioning asylum system and reports of forced returns (Azerbaijan)</li> <li>• Restrictions on the activities of independent media outlets and journalists, including arrests and harassment (Azerbaijan, Belarus)</li> <li>• Political environment (Azerbaijan, Belarus)</li> <li>• Authoritarian and repressive</li> </ul>	<p>political will, corruption and resistance to change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoting human rights and democracy, gender equality and non-discrimination can overcome weaknesses associated with democratic backsliding, social stigma, xenophobia and discrimination, repressions of civil society, restrictions on the activities of independent media</li> <li>• Access to EU funds and expertise can help overcome limited resources and technical challenges</li> <li>• Cross-border cooperation and regional development programs can help address infrastructure challenges, structural and technical barriers by encouraging joint ventures and enhancing border security</li> <li>• Integration in the European education and research area and development of human capital can help overcome limited progress in implementing human rights reforms by enhancing educational opportunities and human capital development</li> <li>• EU best practices promotion can mitigate limited capacity and engagement of stakeholders (NGO, local authorities, private sector)</li> </ul>	<p>challenges (external factors, global crisis):</p> <p>Prevention: addressing weak governance and corruption can strengthen economic resilience and reduce the impact of external economic challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weakness: lack of independence of the judiciary</li> </ul> <p>Threat: compliance issues with EU regulation standards</p> <p>Prevention: ensuring judicial independence is essential to support the rule of law and fulfil EU standards, thus preventing compliance issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weakness: limited progress in human rights reforms, repression of civil society, and restrictions on independent media</li> </ul> <p>Threat: difference in integration paths and democracy levels</p> <p>Prevention: progress in human rights reforms and protecting civil society and independent media are essential for maintaining a coherent path towards democracy and EU integration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weakness: lack of coordination and limited government cooperation</li> </ul> <p>Threat: external interference or negative influence of third actors</p> <p>Prevention: Increased coordination and government cooperation can strengthen resistance to external intervention and strengthen internal resilience</p>
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<p>government (Azerbaijan, Belarus)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democracy backsliding</li> <li>• Political polarization</li> <li>• Withdrawal from the Eastern Partnership and suspension of the Readmission Agreement (Belarus)</li> </ul>		
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**Table 4: EU democracy support in Eastern Partnership countries: SWOT analysis matrix**

While Table 4 of the Appendix presents the intersections of the 4 main categories (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) by analysing EU support for democracy in the Eastern Partnership countries in a more generalised format, Tables 5; 6; 7 and 8 breaks them down by the target sectors of this paper: Good Governance, Rule of Law, Human/Civil Rights.

EU strategy		S > O (strengths leveraged to realize the opportunities)
<p><b>Good Governance Agenda</b></p>	<p><b>Accountability</b></p>	<p>Vibrant civil society + Engagement in advocacy and policy dialogues -&gt; Strengthened public oversight and transparency -&gt; Accountability enhancement</p> <p>Civil society abroad + International advocacy and reporting -&gt; Monitoring and exposing governance issues -&gt; Enhanced accountability by leveraging international networks and platforms to report on governance failures and advocate for reforms</p> <p>Trust and efforts in legislative processes + Strengthening public financial management -&gt; Transparent budgeting and expenditure processes -&gt; Enhanced legislative transparency and accountability</p> <p>Increased mobility + Capacity building -&gt; Knowledge exchange and collaboration -&gt; Strengthened capacity for accountability measures</p> <p>Progress in electoral processes + Strengthening rule of law -&gt; Strengthened democratic institutions -&gt; Enhanced electoral and governance accountability</p> <p>Association Agreement implementation + Promoting human rights and democracy -&gt; Alignment with European standards -&gt; Enhanced institutional accountability</p>

	<b>Participation</b>	<p>Vibrant civil society + Regional cooperation -&gt; Inclusive regional policy development -&gt; Promotion of regional participation</p> <p>Youth activism + Youth initiatives -&gt; Empowering youth-driven policy engagement</p> <p>Digital activism + Advocacy -&gt; Empowering grassroots voices through digital channels -&gt; Strengthens participation</p> <p>Alignment with EU standards + Promotion of gender equality -&gt; Enhanced gender participation</p>
	<b>Openness</b>	<p>Vibrant civil society + Strengthening democratic institutions -&gt; Civil society engagement in policy dialogues -&gt; Openness in decision-making processes and governance</p> <p>Alignment with EU standards + Strengthening public engagement and consultation -&gt; Increased openness of legislative processes taking into account public feedback</p>
	<b>Effectiveness</b>	<p>Alignment with EU standards + Access to EU funding and expertise -&gt; Strengthening Effectiveness in policy implementation</p> <p>Anti-corruption efforts + Advocacy -&gt; Effective policy implementation through anti-corruption measures</p> <p>Public trust and confidence + Strengthening democratic institutions through the reforms -&gt; Promoting Institutional effectiveness</p>
<b>Rule of Law</b>	<p>Alignment with EU standards + Access to EU funding and expertise -&gt; Implementing legal reforms in line with EU standards -&gt; Advancing the Rule of Law</p> <p>Public trust + Promoting citizen legal awareness -&gt; Enhancing public understanding of legal processes -&gt; Promoting Rule of Law</p> <p>Alignment with EU standards + Strengthening legal education and training -&gt; Building a knowledgeable legal workforce -&gt; Promoting Rule of Law</p> <p>Vibrant civil society + Advocacy for legal reforms -&gt; Mobilizing public support for legal changes -&gt; Strengthening of the Rule of Law</p>	
<b>Human / Civil rights</b>	<p>Vibrant civil society + Advocacy for human rights education -&gt; Building awareness and understanding of human rights -&gt; Strengthening Human/Civil rights</p> <p>Civil society abroad + International human rights networks -&gt; Voicing human rights issues and strengthening the protection of human rights through the international community</p>	

	Alignment with EU standards + Access to EU funding for human rights initiatives -> Implementing human rights reforms in line with EU standards
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**Table 5: EU Strategy: Strengths leveraged to realize the opportunities**

It is noteworthy that when we try to carry out analysis in the field of threat mitigation, which, according to the methodology, relates only to the external environment, it becomes clear that it is very difficult to predetermine their impact on specific categories of democracy. That is, we can more confidently determine the impact of threats on the overall EU strategy of democracy support rather than on the impact on specific areas of the internal environment of democracy. Therefore, in Table 6 and 8 it is presented in a more generalized form.

EU strategy		T < S (mitigating threats through strengths)
<b>Good Governance Agenda</b>	<b>Accountability</b>	Access to the EU funding and expertise + Capacity building -> External interference or negative influence of third actors -> Fostering Good Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights
	<b>Participation</b>	Strengthening internal democratic institutions + aligning legislative practices with EU standards -> Reduction vulnerability to external interference -> Fostering Good Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights
	<b>Openness</b>	Civil society abroad + Digital activism + Networking and partnership -> mitigation democracy backsliding -> Fostering Good Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights
	<b>Effectiveness</b>	EU integration aspiration + Extended political dialogue between countries + Networking and partnership -> Mitigation of different levels of democracy among EaP members -> Fostering Good Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights
<b>Rule of Law</b>		
<b>Human / Civil rights</b>		

**Table 6: EU Strategy: Mitigating threats through strengths**

EU strategy		O > W (opportunities to minimise/ mitigate weaknesses)
<b>Good Governance Agenda</b>	<b>Accountability</b>	<p>Capacity building + Technical assistance + Reforming public and civil services -&gt; Mitigation of limited institutional capacity (public administration, justice, and law enforcement) -&gt; Improved accountability through more effective and capable institutions</p> <p>Access to the EU funding and expertise + Strengthening democratic institutions + Extended political dialogue -&gt; Mitigation of lack of government support and cooperation -&gt; Strengthened accountability with increased governmental backing</p> <p>Advocacy + Cultural exchange + Fostering social inclusion -&gt; Mitigation of limited public awareness -&gt; Enhanced accountability with an informed and engaged public</p>
	<b>Participation</b>	<p>Vibrant civil society + Youth initiatives + Networking and partnership -&gt; Mitigating limited engagement of stakeholders -&gt; Increased participation through collaborative efforts</p> <p>Promoting human rights and democracy + Cultural exchange + Fostering social inclusion -&gt; Mitigation of social stigma and discrimination -&gt; Encouraged citizen participation in a more inclusive society</p> <p>Advocacy + Regional cooperation + Youth initiatives -&gt; Mitigation of limited public awareness -&gt; Increased participation and engagement through awareness campaigns and collaborative efforts</p>
	<b>Openness</b>	<p>Enhancing transparency and accountability + Strengthening good governance practices -&gt; Mitigation of limited transparency -&gt; Improved openness through established mechanisms for accountability and transparency</p> <p>Infrastructure development + Technical assistance + Advocacy -&gt; Minimizing of bureaucratic obstacles -&gt; Enhanced openness by streamlining bureaucratic processes for better public access</p> <p>International mobility + Extended political dialogue between countries + Advocacy -&gt; Mitigation of limited government cooperation -&gt; Improved openness through diplomatic dialogue and collaborative advocacy efforts</p>

	<b>Effectiveness</b>	<p>Capacity building + Networking and partnership -&gt; Mitigation of limited capacity -&gt; Enhanced effectiveness through increased stakeholder engagement and strengthened capacities</p> <p>Access to EU funding and expertise + Investment opportunities -&gt; Mitigation of limited resources -&gt; Improved effectiveness by leveraging external resources and funding</p> <p>Advocacy + Strengthening democratic institutions -&gt; Minimizing of lack of government support -&gt; Increased effectiveness</p>
<b>Rule of Law</b>		<p>Anti-corruption efforts + Improving legal framework + Reforming public and civil services -&gt; Mitigation of weak governance and corruption -&gt; Strengthened rule of law</p> <p>Judicial reforms + Improving legal framework -&gt; Mitigation of lack of independence of the judiciary -&gt; Strengthened rule of law</p> <p>Strengthening democratic institutions + Promoting human rights and democracy -&gt; Mitigation of democratic deficits -&gt; Improved rule of law</p>
<b>Human / Civil rights</b>		<p>Human rights advocacy + Strengthening democratic institutions -&gt; Mitigation of limited progress in human rights reforms -&gt; Improved protection and implementation of human rights</p> <p>Vibrant civil society + Advocacy -&gt; Mitigation of repression of civil society -&gt; Enhanced protection of human rights</p> <p>Promoting gender equality + Improving legal framework -&gt; Mitigation of discrimination and violence -&gt; Improved protection of human rights through the promotion of gender equality</p>

**Table 7: EU Strategy: Opportunities to minimise/ mitigate weaknesses**

EU strategy		<b>T &lt; W (preventing threats from being realised through weaknesses)</b>
<b>Good Governance Agenda</b>	<b>Accountability</b>	Enhancing government cooperation + International collaboration -> Prevention of conflict -> Protecting Good Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights
	<b>Participation</b>	Increasing trust and efforts in legislative processes + Enhancing capacity building -> Minimizing of external interference or negative influence of third actors -> Protecting Good Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights
	<b>Openness</b>	

	<b>Effectiveness</b>	Business development + Economic growth promotion -> Mitigation of weak governance -> Mitigation of external economic challenges -> Protecting Good Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights
<b>Rule of Law</b>		Enhancing institutional capacity + Mitigating social-economic challenges + Working with societal attitudes -> Mitigation of economic and political dependence on Russia -> Fostering Good Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights
<b>Human / Civil rights</b>		




**Table 8: EU Strategy: Preventing threats from being realised through weaknesses**



**REDEMOS: REconfiguring EU DEMOcracy Support.  
Towards a sustained demos in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood**

REDEMOS- 101061738  
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