RESHAPING EU DEMOCRACY SUPPORT AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES

THE EU IN THE EASTERN AND SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOODS

Akram Ezzamouri
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Contributors

Christian Achrainer is a researcher at the Department of Social Sciences and Business at Roskilde University, where he is involved in a Horizon Europe project aimed at designing and pilot-testing an innovative, localised, inclusive approach to EU democracy support in the EU's Eastern and Southern neighbourhood. In his work, he primarily focuses on authoritarianism, democratisation and human rights in Arab countries (especially Egypt), and on European and German foreign affairs. Christian obtained his PhD from Philipps-University Marburg. In his thesis, which was published by Routledge, he analysed how the Egyptian regime utilised its external alignments to sustain its grip to power in the period 2013-2017.

Vladimir Blaiotta is a researcher fellow in the 'Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa' programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). He completed his PhD in 2023 at the University of Catania, with a thesis on migration policies in Niger. During his doctoral studies, he conducted research at the Laboratoire d'études et de recherche sur les dynamiques sociales et le développement local (LASDEL) in Niamey, the École des Hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) in Marseille, and the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (NUPI) in Oslo. His research interests encompass migration studies, security policies and post-colonial studies.

Giulia Daga is a research fellow at the School of International Studies of the University of Trento and adjunct lecturer in International Relations and Middle East Politics at John Cabot University in Rome. She is a former research fellow in the IAI's 'Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa' programme. Her work looks at the links between foreign policy and identity discourses, with a focus on the Gulf monarchies' legitimisation and status-seeking strategies. Her other research interests include authoritarian diffusion, EU-MENA relations, and small powers' alignment strategies.

Akram Ezzamouri is a researcher in IAI's 'Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa' research programme. Akram holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science, International Relations and Human Rights and a Master's degree

in European and Global Studies from the University of Padova. His research interests include the study of transitional justice policies in authoritarian and conflict contexts – with a particular focus on the Maghreb region. Furthermore, he collaborated with the "Antonio Papisca" Human Rights Centre on research and editorial activities for the periodic publication of the Italian Yearbook of Human Rights.

Andrea Gawrich is Professor of International Integration with a special focus on Eastern Europe at Justus Liebig University Giessen. He is deputy executive director of the Giessen Center for Eastern Europe (GiZo), where she heads Section IV, 'Security Cultures in Eastern Europe'. Her research focuses on democracy promotion, security policy, conflict research and the EU, OSCE, Council of Europe and NATO. She was also a coordinator of the Horizon Europe project SHAPEDEM-EU on democracy support in the EU neighbourhood. The project focuses on understanding democracy as a social practice and collective learning process and developing innovative instruments for cooperation between the EU and its neighbouring states.

Daniela Huber is Associate Professor in the Political Science Department of Roma Tre University. She is scientific advisor of the IAI's 'Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa' programme, which she had led from 2019 to 2022, and co-editor of The International Spectator. She has scientifically coordinated the EU funded Horizon 2020 project MEDRESET (2016-2019) and has been involved as co-workpackage leader in the Horizon Europe and Horizon 2020 projects SHAPEDEM-EU, BRIDGES, EU-LISTCO, as well as the Jean-Monnet Network EUMENIA.

Anastasiia Kudlenko specialises in societal resilience in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war and security of Wider Europe, with the geographic focus on Eastern neighbourhood countries and the Western Balkans. She works as Research Fellow at the Institute for Global Sustainable Development at the University of Warwick and has extensive experience in non-governmental sector.

Karim Makdisi is Associate Professor of International Politics and Director of the Programme in Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB). He has also directed the Environmental Policy programme within AUB's Interfaculty Environmental Sciences Program (IGESP) since 2004. He was a founding member and served on the first

Board of Trustees of the Arab Council for the Social Sciences (ACSS), where he is also currently an associated researcher in the Critical Studies Working Group; and also served as the Associate Director at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB.

Nona Mikhelidze is Senior Fellow at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). She holds a PhD in Political Science from Scuola Normale Superiore (Pisa) and an M.A. in Regionalism: Central Asia and Caucasian Studies from Humboldt University Berlin. Her research interests include the EU and Eastern neighbourhood, as well as Russia and its foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. She frequently appears as a commentator on Italian TV and radio channels, discussing issues related to the Russian war against Ukraine. In 2023, she was awarded the Viareggio Prize as the journalist of the year for her contribution to the public debate on the war.

Jamil Mouawad is Assistant Professor of Politics and Policy and Director of the Programme in Public Policy and International Affairs (PPIA) at the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration at the American University of Beirut (AUB). He is a Faculty Fellow at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Relations. His research areas of interest include state-society relations, critical security studies, democratisation, social movements and ethics in social sciences. He is a founding member of the Beirut School for Critical Security Studies, and the Ethics in Social sciences programme initiated by the Arab Council for Social Sciences (ACSS).

Anna Osypchuk is an Associate Professor and Director for Research at the School for Policy Analysis NaUKMA. She was a Fulbright visiting scholar at Rutgers University and a visiting scholar and lecturer at CEES, Glasgow University, Lund University, Science Po Paris-Dijon, and a Visiting Associated Professor at CREEES, Stanford University. Her research focuses on (post-)conflict resolution, socio-political and cultural transformations in Eastern Europe; identities and collective memory, interplay of agency, cognition, social structures and culture; sociology of law; thus, spanning sociology, political science and media studies. Also, she is involved into policy-oriented research on reintegration and conflict-resolution.

Michelle Pace is Professor in Global Studies at the Department of Social Sciences and Business at Roskilde University. She is also Associate Fellow in the Europe Programme at Chatham House, London. She has been the

Danish partner lead on the conceptual work-package for the Horizon Europe project SHAPEDEM-EU. A political scientist by training, her research and teaching focuses on the intersection between European, Middle East, critical migration, democratisation and peace & conflict studies.

Alexandra Sabou is a seasoned professional with a decade of experience in advocacy and project management. She is currently the Advocacy and Eastern Partnership Index Manager at the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), where she spearheads the organisation's advocacy efforts and oversees the development of the Eastern Partnership Index.

Sarah Sabra is a communications and policy practitioner pursuing her MA in Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB). She has worked with international NGOs, a World Health Organization collaborating centre, and served as a Political Affairs Assistant at the League of Arab States, bringing together experience in advocacy, research and regional diplomacy.

Fabian Schöppner is a doctoral candidate at the Justus Liebig University Giessen in Germany and has been a co-coordinator of the Horizon Europe project SHAPEDEM-EU. His ongoing doctoral thesis examines compliance with European Court of Human Rights judgements and the involvement of international civil society organisations in the areas of gender rights and the prevention of torture. His research focuses include European integration, democratisation, human rights, international organisations, civil society and conflict management.

Aijan Sharshenova is a Leading Visiting Researcher at the Populist Encounters research group, Riga Stradins University, and the executive director at Crossroads Central Asia, a foreign policy think tank. She has been a member of the University of Warwick's SHAPEDEM-EU team.

Anton Suslov is a Senior Analyst at the School for Policy Analysis, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. His research focuses on conflict and peace studies, identities in the divided and post-conflict societies, secessionist movements, and the Donbas region. He is also a participant in three Horizon 2020 projects: JOINT (completed), SHAPEDEM-EU (completed) and REUNIR (ongoing).

List of acronyms

3RF	Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework
AA	Association Agreement
ACHR	Access Centre for Human Rights
ACP	African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States
AFET	Committee on Foreign Affairs
ASAP	Act in Support of Ammunition Production
CCER	Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform
CEC	Central Election Commission
CEPA	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement
CEPS	Centre for European Policy Studies
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CIDOB	Barcelona Centre for International Affairs
CIMIC	Civil-Military Cooperation
CoE	Council of Europe
CoP	Communities of practices
CSF	Civil Society Forum
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSO/LA	Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities Instrument
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement/Area
DG	Directorate-General
DG ECHO	DG for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EaPIC	Eastern Partnership Integration and Cooperation
ECCP	European Coordination of Committees and Associations for Palestine
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists Group
EDA	European Defence Agency
EDIRPA	European Defence Industry Reinforcement through

	Common Procurement Act
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEC	European Economic Community
EED	European Endowment for Democracy
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
EIB	European Investment Bank
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
ENPI	European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument
EOM	EU Election Observation Mission
EPC	European Policy Centre
EPF	European Peace Facility
ESCWA	UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
EU	European Union
EUAM	European Union Advisory Mission
EuFoA	European Friends of Armenia
EUISS	EU Institute for Security Studies
EUMA	European Union Mission in Armenia
EUMAM	EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine
EUMCAP	EU Monitoring Capacity in Armenia
EuMEP	European Middle East Project
EUPAC	European Palestinian Council for Political Relations
EUPOL COPPS	EU Police Mission in the Palestinian Territories
FIIAPP	Fundación Internacional y para Iberoamérica de Administración y Politicas Públicas
FP7	7th Framework Programme
FSB	Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti (Federal Security Service)
GMF	German Marshall Fund
GNP	Georgian National Platform
GUE/NGL	European United Left/Nordic Green Left
HQ	Headquarters
HR/VP	High Representative/Vice-President
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
IcSP	Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace
ID	Identity and Democracy
LADE	Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections

LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MIP	Multiannual Indicative Programme
MoU	Memorandum of understanding
MP	Mobility Partnership
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NIF	Neighbourhood Investment Facility
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PA	Palestinian Authority
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
PARMSS	Programme d'appui à la réforme et à la modernisation du secteur de la sécurité
PCP	Palestinian Civil Police
PHRO	Palestinian Human Rights Organization
PiS	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice party)
SAPO	Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office
SBI	State Bureau of Investigation
S&D	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
SGUA	Support Group for Ukraine
SSF	Single Support Framework
SSR	Security sector reform
SWP	Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
UEN	Union for Europe of the Nations
UfM	Union for the Mediterranean
UN	United Nations
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA	UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UNSC	UN Security Council
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
Verts/ALE	Groupe des Verts/Alliance libre européenne

INTRODUCTION

1.

The EU and its Democracy Support: Discursive and Behavioural Practices, Contestation, Democratic (Un)Learning

Christian Achrainer, Akram Ezzamouri,
Daniela Huber and Michelle Pace

Since the early 1990s, the European Union's engagement with democracy support has evolved alongside its own transformations and expansions, reflecting broader debates on Europe's role and identity in the post-Cold War order. What began as a process focused on the democratisation of the states that would later join the EU during the so-called "Eastern enlargements" gradually extended towards what became known as the Union's "neighbourhood" (Mälksoo 2009 and 2010, Mark and Slobodian 2018), the states to its East and South that were then framed as "the new frontiers" of its external relations.

Regarding the EU and the neighbourhood, two main threads emerged in the literature. The first one looks at the effects of democracy support, for instance examining how instruments such as linkage, leverage and governance have affected third states (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011). This literature has principally found that the EU has been impactful in terms of promoting liberal economies, rather than liberal polities. Autocratic (Heydemann and Leenders 2011) and hybrid (Mikhelidze 2018) rule has remained resilient. A second strain of the literature has looked more into the type of actor the EU is or the role it plays through its foreign and security policy. In particular, it has investigated the concept Normative Power Europe and its rhetoric-practice gap (Pace 2009, Börzel and van Hüllen 2014) whereby the EU has claimed to promote democracy in rhetoric, but in practice mainly focused on stabilisation and/or sustaining

its security, economic and migration interests which has contributed to the resilience of hybrid and autocratic regimes (Achrainer 2019 and 2023). Thus, the literature has provided a rather concise assessment which has highlighted how the EU has contributed to a reality of hybrid and autocratic regimes in its neighbourhoods, even though when it comes to the East, the literature has also highlighted instances of positive EU impact (Korosteleva 2016).

In the past decade, the literature on democracy support has taken a step ahead in terms of what these findings say about the "nature of the beast" of the EU (Risse 1996), in our case in its neighbourhoods. Taking cues from Ian Zielonka's work on the EU "as Empire" (Zielonka 2006) in the enlargement process, Raffaella Del Sarto has likened the EU to an empire-of-sorts also in its neighbourhoods, suggesting that the EU's "norm-based behaviour is in itself a utility-maximizing strategy, which also serves the construction of a normative identity" (Del Sarto 2016:215). Democracy support plays an essential part in this process as it codifies the EU as democratic/(post-)modern, the neighbourhoods as insufficiently democratic/modern or even undemocratic/pre-modern (Cebeci 2016) and in need of EU intervention. Exporting its own model, Teti et al. (2020) and Huber (2020) have also found that in its Southern neighbourhood the EU has promoted democratisation against local needs and imaginaries of democracy. Furthermore, seen from the neighbourhoods, EU policies at large impact societies and their political constellations, including democracy. In this context, Del Sarto and Tholens (2020) have highlighted resistance at the state/macro-level in the Southern neighbourhood regarding various areas of governance.

Taking this literature together, it points to a certain degree of *coloniality in democracy* and *democracy in coloniality* (Ballestrin 2014) whereby the EU produces democracy (like modernity) as an "exclusively European" product and experience, where "Europeans imagine themselves as the exclusive bearers, creators, and protagonists" (Quijano 2000:542) of democracy, whilst the overall relationship between the EU and its neighbourhoods remains asymmetric in terms of trade, movement of people etc. As Larbi Sadiki (2022:68-70) has pointed out, this relationship happens on "'European' imaginaries of development; of aid; of democracy promotion; of visa laws; of security; of migration; of trade exchange, tariffs and quotas; and of stability", whereas "[l]ocal repositories of imaginaries and experiences are written out of EU policymaking such as the

Barcelona process, the ENP or migration policies" and a focus on smooth achieved outcomes "edits out polarities, oppositions and struggles", thus the very political contestation which is actually taking place. Sadiki therefore calls to liberate both the former coloniser and the colonised "from this phantasm of democracy promotion", and to focus on the people, "not as objects but as agents in the process of transformation" (Sadiki 2022:70-71). Together with Laylah Saleh, he has proposed a didactic loop of shared democratic learning in this respect (Sadiki and Saleh 2022). The Democracy Learning Loop conceptualises democracy and democracy support as a repertoire of practices and the tacit background knowledge that sustains them, shifting attention from formal institutions to what people actually do and know in everyday political life. It comprises three interlinked loops: 1) (un)learning by the EU from local democratic practices; 2) intra-EU learning across communities of practice to align and avoid contradictory external actions; 3) and horizontal learning among local actors to build and share democratic knowledge (Achrainer and Pace 2026).

To follow Sadiki's call and centre in on agency and contestation in regard to EU external democracy support with a view towards democratic learning, the conceptual focus of this volume is on how agency and contestation shape the EU's democracy support and its relations with its eastern and southern neighbourhoods. On the one hand, this involves exploring discursive practices (Chapters 2-5), questioning how democracy and democracy support in the neighbourhoods is contested within the EU, and which voices are empowered (or marginalised) in producing knowledge about democracy. On the other hand, attention is turned to behavioural practices in the EU's neighbourhoods (Chapters 6-11), to assess which role democracy plays in EU external practices and whether we can see cases of democratic (un)learning.

As an overall methodological approach, this conceptual framework[1] adopts *the contrapuntal method* which, inspired by Edward Said (1994), Wolff et al. (2022) and Huber (2024) have recently proposed for the study of EU foreign policy in an attempt to stake out pathways towards more reflexive reconstruction of EU foreign policy. In particular, they have

pointed out that focusing on contestation through analysing dissonant perspectives offers a way towards '*transgressive learning*' (Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2016) in respect to *very concrete (rather than abstract) political questions/challenges*. The contrapuntal approach has been proposed by Edward Said as a methodology in which the listener achieves "simultaneous awareness" of "both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (Said 1994:51). Wolff et al. (2022) propose to listen to the contestation and dissonance by including voices on the macro (EU/state), meso (civil society) and micro (subaltern) level. The subaltern (Gramsci 1992, Spivak 1994) is here defined as those people who have a stake in the contestation, but whose voices (and thus agency) are ignored, excluded, or even violently silenced and displaced in this very contestation. This lens helps to follow contestation and democratic learning, through a "story of difference" (Chowdhry 2007:106), "in which all people are represented and none left out, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant" (Collins 1998:249). This method is applied to both agency, contestation and learning within the EU, as well as agency, contestation and learning in EU-neighbourhood relations.

1.1 Scope and research questions

In the past decade, historic uprisings and protests for democracy have taken place in what the EU defines as its "neighbourhood" in the East and South. As they are ongoing and their fate is still unclear, the question of how the EU has reacted to them is important, both from a perspective of the respective countries where the EU constitutes a player, and from the perspective of the EU itself, at a moment marked by global democratic backsliding, including within its own borders. These developments invite reflection on whether such events have generated moments of self-awareness within the EU, i.e. moments in which it has reconsidered or transformed its discursive and behavioural practices in the field of democracy support.

Historic turning points, understood as path-altering events and critical junctures in history, provide a useful lens for examining these dynamics. They first and foremost alter the domestic setting and developments in the neighbourhoods, e.g. by questioning or challenging existing political (as well as social and economic) systems and power structures. Yet, they are also seen as setting into motion a period of reflection within the EU,

among others, in which different actors assess events and potential consequences, critically reflect on their own approaches and priorities, and consider alterations and alternatives. This period of reflection may or may not involve (un)learning within the EU, and it may or may not lead to a change in behavioural and discursive practices. Thus, while historic turning points are always followed by a period of reflection, they can – but do not necessarily have to – result into moments of epiphany[2] (for the EU).

In other words, the key concern here is whether the EU can mature into a learning institution towards new ways of thinking and being in a changing world, so also becoming more accountable both within the EU as well as vis-à-vis societies which are impacted by EU policies. This includes the question of how the EU can go about recognising the need for and importance of (un)learning the embedded ways in which the EU has been "thinking about" and "doing" democracy support in its eastern and southern neighbourhoods.

This conceptual discussion, together with the chapters that follow, therefore address two interrelated dimensions of the EU's democracy support, each explored through country-specific case studies (Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia). The first looks into discursive practices of contestation within the EU itself, asking who produces knowledge in the EU on democracy in the neighbourhoods and related EU democracy support and who is excluded from knowledge production; who renders EU institutions accountable on its democracy support practices and who is excluded from such an exercise; and what barriers as well as enabling factors towards democratic (un)learning might become evident in and through these practices of contestation.

The second dimension investigates behavioural practices of the EU in its eastern and southern neighbourhoods, where democracy support has been largely detached from what are often considered "real" foreign policy dossiers like energy, migration, trade and security. Whilst the EU treats

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[2] Denzin's (1989) theory of interpretive biography emphasises the pivotal role of epiphany as a state of deep, insightful reflection upon one's own life and the phenomenon under study. Interpretive biographic scholars see epiphany as a narrative of self-enlightenment and critical revelation that reflects the transformation of the basic structure of the informant's life (ibid.), gives accountability to their turning points (O'Sullivan 1999), and "illuminates personal character" (Gottzén 2019:22). On turning points and moments of epiphany see, Pace and Bennetzen (2023).

them as separate, all these fields have a real impact on democracy. Here, the concern is how far are EU external practices imbued by *democraticness*? In other words, which role does democracy as a practice play in EU external measures, *which absences and presences can we observe*? Does the EU – intentionally and/or unintentionally – avoid democracy in its practices not only in the area of democracy support, but also in the areas of energy, migration security and trade?

1.2 A taxonomy of multilevel contestation within the EU

As pointed out above, the literature on EU democracy support does look into the EU's institutional discourse, but hardly investigates how these policies are actually *politically contested* within the EU itself. When there is inquiry into such contestation, it is typically oriented towards member states contestation of EU foreign policy and its interests (Müller et al. 2021). Yet contestation has become increasingly multilevel within the EU institutional framework, as "[d]ifferent political and societal actors – from political parties to civil society organisations – have been engaging in acts of internal contestation" (Lovato et al. 2021:2). This applies particularly to democracy support, which is inherently political and subject to contestation by a wide variety of institutions and actors in the European space, especially in moments of political transformation in the neighbourhoods. In this sense, contestation is understood here as a "social practice [that] entails objection to specific issues that matter to people. In international relations contestation by and large involves the range of social practices, which discursively [or behaviourally] express disapproval of norms" (Wiener 2014:1). Contestation is constitutive of social change, for it always involves a critical redress of norms – the rules of the game. Thus, it can be a positive dynamic of reflection, and it must be part of any healthy democratic process. However, practices of contestation can equally challenge democracy and democracy support as such.

To answer the research questions outlined above, the chapters under Part I of this volume look into the multilevel contestation within the EU, investigating this not on an abstract or static level as typically done by looking into key EU documents produced (as the final outcome of contestation), but instead on a *country-case study specific level* (Armenia, Georgia, Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia, Ukraine), in respect to *concrete pivotal political moments*, and by examining the *very contestation* in which various actors in the EU are involved. The focus is then on how key actors in the EU as a

"multilevel polity" (Hooghe and Marks 2001) have assessed, narrated and contested pivotal events in these countries as well as the EU democracy-related policy response. These *pivotal moments* can be directly related to democracy (for example a wave of mobilisations or an election) but can also be other events which have an important impact on the local political level or pivotal moments in the relationship between the EU and a partner country (such as signing an association agreement or the granting of candidate status in the framework of the country's EU accession process).

On this basis, actors within the EU that have been involved in contestation are mapped across three levels, with attention also to whose voices may be sidelined or silenced:

- macro level: European Council, Council of the EU, European Commission, European Parliament, EEAS and EU delegations in third countries;
- meso level: civil society organisations, lobbies, media, think tanks;
- micro level: diaspora communities and individuals.

To assess contestation, discursive practices at these levels are read by focusing on four particular methodological devices borrowed from the policy narrative framework (Jones et al. 2014), that is the setting, plot, characters, and moral of the story/policy action in how a story is told. This framework allows to directly link the narrative representation shortly before, during and after historic turning points (and possibly subsequent moments of epiphany) in the respective neighbourhood country in relation to the policy (script) of the EU, and it allows to identify and describe various practices of contestation.

The *setting* is what is discursively defined as the stage where the narrative unfolds. So, it might be that actors in the EU agree that the overall setting in Georgia, for example, is a "hybrid regime" or a "state in transition towards or from democracy". Or there might be contestation if the overall setting in Palestine is an "EU-supported state-building process" or a situation of "apartheid". The setting might also include economic and demographic factors (for example connecting a "youth bulge" to unemployment versus connecting austerity policies to unemployment in a state like Tunisia etc.).

The *characters* is who appears as hero, villain or victim. Who – according to the discourse – is harming democracy, who instead is a force for democracy? Who are the democratisers and those which "need to be demo-

cratised"? These characters can be individuals, governmental institutions, parties, social movements, non-state actors, foreign actors (the US, Russia for example) etc. An example of a contestation in the EU here is the case of the Muslim Brotherhood and the role various actors attribute to it in democracy and democratic transition as a villain versus a victim.

The *plot* connects "characters to one another and to the policy setting" and so adds the interpretative layer to the story. Such an interpretation could for example be that the Arab uprisings are represented as "revolutions", as a "spring" (likening it to Europe's past for example), or an "awakening" (denying agency to Arab citizens before the uprisings). Such an interpretative layer can also be gendered or orientalist. Furthermore, it can also highlight the "digital dimension" of an uprising for example, that is the role that digital technology has played in transforming a particular discursive frame or practice; or how digital technology has played a role in suppressing dissent.

The *moral of the story* is the policy solution offered in relation to the setting, characters and plots. This is where EU foreign policy at large, and democracy support in particular, come in. Which role is foreseen for the EU, as which type of actor is the EU portrayed? What policy instruments – for example conditionality – are proposed or rejected? Which gaps, mistakes, double-standards, strengths, challenges are identified in EU policies? Contestation could happen for example on the issue of sanctions, as happened vis-à-vis Egypt after the coup and Rabaa massacre in 2013.

On all four dimensions, *the larger perspective is to inquire into this intra-EU contestation with a view towards democratic (un)learning,* that is inquiring into what is contested and by whom; who is included or excluded in this practice; are there codifications of differences on the basis of "democraticness" or paths to overcome them? How is the EU and its policies represented and problematised, and are resistances, polarities, oppositions and struggles becoming evident in this discourse?

1.3 EU external practices and democracy

EU foreign policy practices in the field of energy, trade, security and migration are often characterised by a power asymmetry as policy proposals and interventions are devised mainly in Brussels, are often implemented in a top-down manner which does not involve locally rooted civil society or grassroots actors, and gives local communities no means to be involved in

assessing policies, as well. However, this might vary, particularly across states in the neighbourhoods with or without EU membership perspective or candidate status. Thus, overall EU practices need to be seen in their effect in terms of either practicing a largely democratic (where democracy transcends polities and is instilled in a foreign policy relationship between them) or undemocratic relationship into being. This expands on the work pursued by Khakee and Wolff (2022) who have examined EU practices in its everyday dealings with civil society in various issue areas (trade, anti-corruption, applied research, gender and LGBTI) to see "if, in those contexts, EU interaction with its interlocutors is based on democratic norms or not – i.e. whether and to what extent it is projecting democratic norms and practices". Whilst Khakee and Wolff mainly look at practices of everyday interaction in the donor-recipient relationship between the EU and local civil society, chapters under Part II of this volume examine this from a perspective of social empowerment, embeddedness, accountability and democratic (un)learning across the macro/ meso/micro levels.

To understand how far EU external practices are characterised by democraticness, a broad array of external practices across policy fields must be examined, with a view to absences and presences in terms of an overall democratically practiced relationship. The core concern is whether the ways in which the EU engages externally support, or instead undermine, democracy, and in how far practices in fields other than democracy support contradict what is officially labelled as democracy support.

Parting from the overall perspective of this concept chapter as outlined above, three dimensions are considered key in assessing the democraticness of EU external practices:

- *Social embeddedness* relates to the idea that "meaningful participation is a core element of democracy" (Achrainer and Pace 2024:12). In EU external practices, there must therefore be space to include not only governmental actors or the typical civil society partners of the EU, but all affected communities (also from a gender/intersectional perspective) should be included and listened to in the policy-making process (inclusivity) and have access to the relevant information (transparency), including through digital means. This means that, for example, in trade negotiations trade unions, particularly also representations of women workers, should be included and listened to, whilst such negotiations should also be transparent; or if the EU supports the building of large solar power plants, the local communities affected by such

solar power plants need to be included in the policy-making process.

- *Social empowerment* relates to the idea that "democracy materialises and manifests itself in and through practices which are based on local systems of democratic knowledge" (Achrainer and Pace 2024:12) regarding democracy itself, but also other policy fields such as security (see for example Bilgin 2015), migration, energy, development or trade etc. Is such local knowledge on these policy areas taken into consideration, or does the EU export its own models and knowledge? Local knowledge might become particularly evident for example in contestation, but – whilst often directly provided to the EU through civil society networks or academic research reports – is often "left on the shelves".
- *Social accountability* means that those people who are affected by a policy (i.e. not external technocrats or experts) are involved in its evaluation and assessment, giving them mechanisms of feedback and being open on the side of EU institutions to re-evaluate and transform policies for the better (in terms of addressing local peoples' needs). Such social accountability (Bovens 2007) is more horizontal/diagonal/transgressive (transgressing EU borders as EU external practices do) and provides more pathways towards reflections and learning, as it is directly rooted in society as well as in multi-level transnational networks which shares information, knowledge, or ideas. It can also overcome the challenge which gatekeepers (both locally and in the EU) present for learning and change. However, civil society actors are not elected and cannot control policy in the same manner that courts or parliaments can do.

Conclusion

This chapter has set out the conceptual framework and analytic orientation that guide the volume's inquiry into EU democracy support: a focus on contestation, on potential (un)learning around historic turning points, on the Democracy Learning Loop as a new framework for democratic practices, and on "democraticness" as a lens to evaluate EU external policies.

The chapters that follow put these concepts to work empirically: by listening contrapuntally to voices across macro, meso and micro levels, by tracing narrative framings and policy practices around concrete turning points moments, and by assessing how far EU action fosters or obstructs socially embedded, empowering and accountable forms of democracy. The aim is not only to map variation across six countries in the Eastern

and Southern neighbourhood, but also to understand the practices, actors and narratives that enable or block democratic (un)learning.

Taken together, the volume seeks to move the academic and policy debate toward more practice-sensitive understandings of democracy support, with the ambition of informing more reflexive, accountable and grounded ways for the EU and its partners to engage in democratic change.

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PART I
TAXONOMIES OF EUROPEAN CONTESTATIONS

2.

Who Is to Blame?
European Contesting Narratives
to EU's Democracy Support in Lebanon

Giulia Daga

Since the launch of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership in 1995, democracy support has been a pillar of the relationship between the EU and Lebanon.[1] In 2006, with the entry into force of the EU-Lebanon Association Agreement (signed in 2002), the country became a target of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which insists on supporting "human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Lebanon" through the establishment of independent public institutions and a focus on fighting corruption (EEAS 2021).

A second phase of EU's engagement towards the country coincided with the post-Arab uprisings context, the so-called 2015 'refugee crisis', and the launch of a renewed version of the Neighbourhood Policy.[2] Among the new instruments with an effect on Lebanon, the EU launched a regional trust fund in response to the increasing presence of Syrian refugees in the neighbouring countries, with the aim to improve their public services. In 2016, the EU and Lebanon adopted a Compact that increasingly moved the attention towards stability, security, counterterrorism and migration, while still being adamant in promoting rule of law and democratic governance (European Commission 2017).

A third phase in the EU's approach to Lebanon can be situated after the 2019 protests in the country, which brought the Lebanese economic

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[1] European Commission DG Trade website: *Lebanon*, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/node/492_en.

[2] European Commission DG for Enlargement website: *European Neighbourhood Policy. What Is It?*, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/node/3344_en.

and political collapse to the surface. Since, the EU has played a major role as a donor of medical equipment during the Covid-19 pandemic and as a co-sponsor of the Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF) after the 4 August 2020 Beirut port explosion.[3] The three central goals of the 3RF brought back at the centre the need for structural social and political reforms towards a more accountable and democratic country (EEAS 2021).

In addition, the EU has increased its effort in support of the rule of law by adopting in 2021 a framework for targeted sanctions on persons and entities responsible for undermining democracy or the rule of law in Lebanon (European Council 2021). The framework was extended in 2023 (European Council 2023). Moreover, in May 2024, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced to pledge 1 billion euros of funding towards Lebanon until 2027 to strengthen basic services, the economy, the Lebanese Armed Forces, border management and the protection of refugees (European Commission 2024a).

Despite the strong discursive emphasis put on the EU's role in democracy support to Lebanon throughout all these phases, the European Union has been criticised for both its objectives and *modus operandi*, as will be shown in the following lines. Indeed, this chapter seeks to trace the narratives of contestation of EU democracy support practices in Lebanon, with a focus on voices that come from within the EU, both among insiders and outsiders, taking as a reference the conceptual framework (Chapter 1) developed as part of the SHAPEDEM-EU project.[4]

First, the chapter provides an overview of who speaks about Lebanon in Europe, both inside and outside the EU institutions. Second, it maps the contestation of EU democracy support practices, considering whether discursive change has coincided with the three phases outlined in this introduction (post-2005; post-2011; post-2019). Based on the works of Jones and McBeth (2010) and Stone (2012) on narratives in the political and policy spheres, the paper identifies two main clusters of narratives into which to categorise different specific types of contestations. To do this, the chapter is based on the qualitative discourse analysis of twenty-nine motions for resolution in the European Parliament between 2005 and 2024, and eight in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in

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October and November 2024. The data is further enriched by open-source information on EU democracy support to Lebanon.

2.1 Mapping the actors: Who speaks in Europe about Lebanon's democracy?

European actors producing discourse on EU democracy support in Lebanon are multiple. At the institutional level, the European Council, the Council of the EU, the European Parliament and the European Commission are the main speakers on the general approach the EU should follow to support democracy in Lebanon. An additional layer distinguishes between the Commission's bodies located in Brussels' HQs, such as the Middle East office within DG Near, and the EU Delegation in Lebanon. The geographic distance and the different leverage that each body has in the decision-making process contribute to creating differences in building background knowledge and preferences among the various communities of practices (CoP). Discursive nuances among institutional actors can also be observed based on individual positions, for example between political groups in the European Parliament, or between officials such as the EEAS High Representative or the President of the European Commission. The multilayered architecture of EU institutional actors working on Lebanon becomes further complex when including those operating at a technical level, such as Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), Neighbourhood Investment Facility (NIF), the Erasmus+ Programme, the 7th Framework Programme (FP7), the Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe programmes and the European Investment Bank (EIB).

In this context, it is very difficult to identify the actors that count the most in making democracy-related decisions on Lebanon within the EU (Interview 7). This difficulty has much to do with the number of actors that have a voice within the institutions, but also with the strength of the member states in their capacity to influence the EU's decisions, especially through the European Council and the Council of the EU, France *in primis* (Interview 8).

Beyond this first circle of EU insiders (composed of the EU institutions, decentralised bodies and the EU member states), there is a vast number of non-EU international organisations that cooperate with the EU as

recipients of funding or as partners in co-led structures and activities, such as the IOM, the United Nations, the World Bank, or the Council of Europe, for example through shared democracy support projects under the umbrella of the South Programme.[5]

An additional circle of actors includes non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or networks of NGOs that implement democracy support projects funded by the EU, such as EuroMed Rights or the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). Beyond the EU-funded private actors, there is a world of independent organisations which do not receive direct EU funding and yet seek to support democracy in Lebanon in cooperation with European actors, such as LIFE Lebanon, Change Lebanon, or the Arab Reform Initiative. With their more independent position compared to EU-funded NGOs, these actors are placed in a freer position to contest the EU democracy support malpractices, or lack of practices altogether (Private conversation in Brussels, 2024).

Media outlets, universities and research institutes compose the next circle of actors promoting specific discourses on EU democracy support in Lebanon. Mainstream media and policy research institutes producing discourse on the topic include *Politico*, *Euractiv*, International Crisis Group (ICG) and Carnegie Europe. According to a Lebanon analyst respondent (Interview 8), ICG cannot be considered as an insider in EU decision-making, but its voice is heard through the provision of recommendations in public outputs and closed-doors meetings.

Finally, the most difficult circle to categorise and map includes the voices of independent journalists, bloggers, or activists who talk about EU democracy support not (only) through official channels but also through personal websites, social media and similar informal or personal channels of expression. Among these, an additional difficulty lies in understanding their level of impact on EU decision-making. For example, two respondents – an independent freelance Brussels-based journalist and a professor teaching in EU-funded programmes – argue that they cannot be considered as insiders, but their voice might be indirectly heard in Brussels through informal conversations, interviews, or if some officials read their writings (Interviews 1 and 7).

Though not aiming at comprehensiveness, this section has tried to provide some insights on the constellation of actors producing discourse

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[5] Lebanon joined the South Programme in 2018.

on EU democracy support in Lebanon. The next part of the chapter seeks to provide an overview of the discursive contestation to EU democracy support practices by some of the actors identified in this section. Instead of focusing on the identity of the speakers, the next paragraphs will focus on the contents of contestation, by always keeping in mind the overarching question: has the EU learnt and/or can the EU learn from contestation in its (discursive) approach towards democracy support in Lebanon?

2.2 Mapping the contestation

This section is based on the qualitative discourse analysis of twenty-nine motions for resolution to the European Parliament raised between January 2005 and September 2024, and eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with a diverse sample of individuals that work *from* Europe *on* Lebanon (and especially on EU-Lebanon relations), conducted in October and November 2024.

The motions have allowed to identify different types of contestation within the EU institutions ('insiders'). The interviews have integrated the perspective of voices that have all defined themselves as 'outsiders'[6] (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8). The analysis has allowed to identify two main groups of *morals of the story* on EU democracy support in Lebanon under which the narratives can be categorised, showing different degrees of contestation from the lightest to the strongest:

1. 'Incremental and/or pragmatic narratives': the EU should do more in line with what has done and/or act flexibly based on the context (the main problem is within Lebanon and/or in the region);

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[6] From the circle of both more 'underground' and 'mainstream' media, I interviewed one independent Brussels-based freelance journalist with more than twenty years of experience on Lebanon and its relations with Europe (Interview 1), and a Lebanon-based analyst for the mainstream Brussels-based International Crisis Group (Interview 8). From academia, I interviewed a European Professor specialised in EU-MENA relations with a focus on Lebanon (Interview 7). From the circle of NGOs and advocacy groups, I interviewed two respondents from the network organisation EuroMed Rights (Interviews 2 and 3), and a practitioner in strategic communication that worked for the EU in Lebanon (Interview 4). From the circle of non-EU international organisations, I discussed with two members of the Council of Europe (Interviews 5 and 6), that both have worked on projects in Lebanon but are based in different CoE locations in Tunisia and in the North-South Centre in Portugal.

2. 'Copernican revolution narratives': the EU should do differently (the main problem is within the EU).

2.2.1 The incremental and pragmatic contestation narratives

The 'incremental narratives' embrace *morals of the story* by which the EU should do more in support of democracy promotion in Lebanon. In this type of narratives, the objective to support democracy is not put into question. The very moderate contestation here lies in the EU's ineffectiveness in achieving the expected results and tries to suggest ways through which the EU could act in Lebanon. In these narratives, the EU always emerges as the *hero*, the Lebanese people as the *victims*, and the corrupted elites in Lebanon that prevent change as the *villains*.

A slightly different *moral of the story* presented both in the motions and the interviews is that the EU should act more pragmatically and do what is possible based on local developments and opportunities. To further legitimise the argument that 'the problem is the Lebanese context', some respondents have observed that "speaking of democracy promotion in Lebanon is hardly meaningful" (Interview 7), because of internal structural problems that hamper the correct functioning of the state, of the voting system (Interview 4) and of the parliament, where it is hardly possible to pass laws that can implement democratisation (Interview 2). This is why, rather than asking for the EU to do more, this narrative asks the EU to be 'smarter' and more pragmatic, implicitly acknowledging that democracy support should not be a fixed priority.

In the European Parliament, most analysed motions embrace either the 'incremental' or 'pragmatic' narratives. The main change is based on the evolving *setting* from the post-2005 to the post-2019 contexts; there is a general shift from the 'incremental narrative', with democracy-focused motions interested in promoting democracy and fighting corruption, towards more 'pragmatic narratives' increasingly sceptical about the provision of funding in support of the Lebanese institutions altogether. In addition to these general evolving positions, throughout the years some left-wing (GUE/NGL, Verts/ALE and The Left) and right-wing (ECR and ID) political groups have sporadically expressed stronger contesting voices that slightly changed the predominant *morals of the story* and characters' distribution presented above. However, in most cases, these groups later replaced their motions with a joint motion in which their 'outlier' narratives were absent.

Regionalising narrative

In 2005, after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the motion proposed by GUE/NGL (European Parliament 2005) differed from the others in explicitly locating the problems of Lebanon within the broader regional framework and addressing Israel as the primary cause of regional instability. Unlike the other groups, GUE/NGL did not explicitly focus on Hezbollah and the corrupted political elite as the *villains* of the story, while this role is more explicitly attributed to Israel. The *moral of the story* insisted that a more active role of the EU should go beyond the investigation of Hariri's assassination and the monitoring of Lebanese elections to take a stronger regional stance in support of the Middle East peace process.

Despite this greater emphasis on explicitly condemning Israel for the turmoil in Lebanon and in the region, arguing that a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was "likely to normalise relations between all the countries in the region" (European Parliament 2005), with the Israeli withdrawal from the Golan as a pivotal prerequisite for separate peace agreements between Israel, Lebanon and Syria, the motion did not underlie a different view on the role of EU democracy support in Lebanon. Democracy was seen as something that both the Lebanese population and the EU (as heroes of the story) wanted, by stressing "the importance of holding democratic and transparent legislative elections" and by reiterating the need for an EU's increased role in promoting it ('incremental' narrative) (European Parliament 2005). The Euro-Mediterranean partnership and similar multilateral initiatives were described as the solution to the problem. The only contestation to the EU's approach regarded the need to expand its role, rather than putting the basis of the European approach into question. A similar kind of narrative is present in the motion raised by the Verts/ALE in 2006 (European Parliament 2006), by the GUE/NGL group in 2008 (European Parliament 2008a), by the Left in 2021 (European Parliament 2021a) and 2023 (European Parliament 2023).

Criminalisation narrative

From the other side of the political spectrum, the right-wing UEN group emerged in 2008 (European Parliament 2008b) also as a contesting voice. The group urged the EU to add Hezbollah to the terrorist list as an important step toward disarming its militia (UNSC 2004), but also to restoring the rule of law in Lebanon, thus making a direct link between the need

to criminalise Hezbollah and any possible democratic transition in Lebanon (*moral of the story*). This position was however abandoned by the group's next day decision to withdraw their motion and join a joint motion (European Parliament 2008c), which was then adopted with minor amendments as an EU Parliament resolution on 22 May 2008 (European Parliament 2008d). However, despite the absence of this criminalisation narrative in the 2008 joint motion and resolution, in 2013, the military branch of Hezbollah was included in the list of terrorist organisations by the Council of the EU (European Parliament 2020, European Council 2025), thus showing some alignment between the positions of the member states within the Council and the more conservative groups in the Parliament.

In 2021 (European Parliament 2021c) and 2023 (European Parliament 2023), also the ECR increased its anti-Hezbollah stance compared to the previous years, calling for Hezbollah to be designated "in its entirety" as a terrorist organisation, and not only its military branch. In this motion, democracy support was still considered a vital element of the EU's approach to Lebanon, highlighting that the EU should use the measure of targeted sanctions against Lebanese leaders responsible for "corruption and degradation, including officials implicated in the ongoing violations of human rights related to the Beirut port explosion and the efforts to undermine accountability" (European Parliament 2021c, 2023). Both in 2021 and in 2023, the group later joined a joint motion in which it abandoned its focus on terrorism.

Differently from the other uses of the criminalisation narrative, the ID group (European Parliament 2021b) in 2021 did not translate its contesting language into a more moderate joint motion. The use of a criminalising language here shifted from to the focus on terrorism towards Islamism, as the villain was not Hezbollah anymore but Syrian refugees and the EU. The ID group kept openly criticising the use of sanctions by the EU as ineffective and blamed them for having "social and humanitarian consequences for the peoples of the states they were aimed at without making any political difference". Moreover, the ID employed a narrative that challenged the international aid provided to Syrian refugees in Lebanon, arguing that "Syrian families are receiving more subsidies than Lebanese families" and underlining that Syrian refugees have "already committed Islamist attacks in Lebanon". In the ID's narrative, the *villains* are the Syrian refugees, but also the European Commission for its ambiguity in the

use of "EU taxpayer funds, further warning that "destabilisation of the country poses a danger to the EU, specifically in the areas of security and migration". The argument was that the EU, instead of promoting better conditions in Lebanon, has contributed to economic deterioration (through sanctions) and corruption (through a non-transparent use of funds) further exacerbated by the alleged support to Syrian refugees and their Islamist tendencies at the expense of the broader Lebanese population, explicitly referring to the Christian community in Lebanon among the *victims* of the story.

2.2.2 The 'Copernican revolution(s)' contestation narratives

Differently from the previous cluster of narratives, the next group emphasises how the EU should do differently because of things that have to do with the EU more than with Lebanon (or the region). The various narratives in this cluster share the assumption that the EU – with different gradations – plays the role of the *villain.*

Short-term and self-interested reasoning

Despite the great discursive emphasis given by the EU to democracy support in Lebanon, its role – and underlying motives – have often been contested since the beginning of the Association in the early 2000s. In the post-9/11 international context, the EU was already receiving criticism that its actions in the MENA region had been strongly shaped by the narratives of the Global War on Terror. Reinforcing the EU's sense of security by stabilising neighbouring countries was often perceived as the priority compared to democracy support, as it was visible in the closer cooperation the EU was establishing with authoritarian countries, in exchange for their support in counterterrorism activities (Ziadeh 2009).

Similarly, in the post-2005/2006 Lebanese context, despite the strong emphasis on reforms and democracy support in the official discourse, this narrative argues that the main European focus was to prevent another conflict with Israel, while democracy promotion was already taking a secondary role (Interview 1). After the Arab uprisings, the EU policies towards Lebanon reinforced the security-stability nexus, which linked concerns over EU security with policies aimed at stability in the Southern neighbourhood with a clear intent to deal with the refugee crisis originating from the Syrian civil war (Seeberg 2018).

Since 2019, the issue of the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has become increasingly problematic, due to the aggravating economic situation, which directly affected the Lebanese solidarity expressed towards Syrians. The Lebanese public has increasingly started to look critically at those international donors that were perceived as funding Syrians rather than Lebanese (Interview 8). The EU's pledge, through the voice of President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen, in May 2024, to donate 1 billion euros to Lebanon, with a large part dedicated to reinforcing the Lebanese army, to strengthen border control and to support Syrian refugees, further created a negative perception of the EU. The financial assistance package was viewed as a gift to the corrupted elite through a non-conditional provision of such a large amount of money to the government (Interview 4, Mancourant Atallah 2024). At the same time, it was explicitly interpreted as a way for the EU to delegate migration control to Lebanon, so to avoid further arrivals to Europe.[7] To many observers, this EU initiative has once and for all shown that the priority of the EU in Lebanon is not democracy promotion but guaranteeing the EU's short-term interests, in this case through border control and migration management (Interviews 3 and 4). The *moral of the story* of this narrative is that the EU has never seriously promoted democracy in Lebanon, but its own evolving interests. Therefore, it needs to completely revise its priorities and reflect on its role as a democracy supporter.

Problem of double standards

This narrative highlight how the EU has lost a lot of its credibility in the Middle East in the past few years (Interview 1). It argues that people in the Middle East believed that the EU was truly interested in democracy support and shared the assumption that having an increased EU presence in their countries was a positive thing (McCloskey-Gholikhany 2019). However, since the Ukraine war of 2022, and especially after 7 October 2023, the EU has been seen as increasingly more aligned with the US and its voice to have disappeared. As a respondent adds, "the overall public feeling or public perception of all EU and external actors that they are promoting democracy and human rights has been in doubt because of

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[7] "Lebanese Parliament Debates EU's \$1 Billion Aid and Pushes for Border Security", in *L'Orient Today*, 15 May 2024, https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1413891.

what we are witnessing since last year" (Interview 2). The young population especially is seen as increasingly losing hope in what they previously considered as the "leaders of human rights and democracy in the world" (Interview 2). The Arab youth has been witnessing the different value that is attributed by the EU to the loss of lives in Palestine and Lebanon, compared to the value that is attributed to life and human rights in Ukraine. Also, after Israel's sabotage actions (Sanger 2024), targeted killings of Hezbollah's officials, and military invasion of South Lebanon in the Fall of 2024, the EU has been criticised for only having asked for a ceasefire, without pressuring for a stronger stance towards a diplomatic solution through an EU Parliament resolution (De La Feld 2024) or a more pronounced condemnation of the unlawful Israeli behaviour through retaliatory actions such as the suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement (Martorell Junyent 2024). The *moral of the story* of this narrative is that the EU's foreign policy should be more coherent and support democracy and international law consistently in time and across all geographic contexts.

Loss of EU's 'democratic' nature

A similar criticism is raised when considering whether the EU has the legitimacy of self-defining as a democracy supporter *per se*. One respondent explicitly criticises the EU for increasingly disregarding democracy within its borders and therefore being less and less able to present itself as a champion of democracy abroad (Interview 1). Other respondents also underline how the complexity of human rights violations within the European territory makes it increasingly difficult to promote human rights abroad (Interviews 3 and 4). The *moral of the story* of this narrative is strongly connected to the previous one, but instead of looking at the incoherence of the EU's foreign policy, it argues that the EU should first support democracy within its territory and then aim at exporting it abroad.

Lack of clear decision-making and lack of listening

One additional contestation raised against the European Union is the question of too many actors dealing with the Lebanese dossier, spanning from the headquarters in Brussels to the EU Delegation in Beirut. According to most respondents, it is very difficult to understand who the decision-makers are, and most of the officials in the Commission or

the Delegation are seen as "following procedures rather than being able to make decisions" (Interview 1). On the contrary, the EU member states with higher stakes and influence, such as France, are identified as the main actors making decisions. One respondent notices how, to successfully advocate for democracy support in Lebanon, it is thus necessary to create a dialogue with the key countries that play the most active role in the Council (Interview 3). For example, after the Beirut blast of 2020, there was huge lobbying towards the EU member states to table a resolution in the Council for a fact-finding mission looking for responsibilities in the blast. There was at the time a lot of coordination between the Lebanese civil society, international organisations and the European (both EU and non-EU members) embassies in Lebanon. But the EU institutions never proactively replied to these demands, as there was seemingly no appetite to continue in that direction (Interview 2). The additional problem in this absence of clarity is that in Lebanon the population still sees the EU Delegation as the actor responsible for the EU's actions, despite its lack of decisional power, and this often creates reputational problems for the delegation in its capacity to respond to local criticisms (Interview 4). At the same time, the lack of coordination is not only the result of the complex EU decision-making processes, but also of political divisions among member states and political groups that limit the Council's and the Parliament's capacity to work as unified coherent actors not only on democracy support in Lebanon but on EU's decision-making at large.[8]

Largely connected to the fragmentation of decision-making in the EU's multilevel democracy support architecture, some respondents contest the lack of EU listening to what the people want, with the EU seen as pushing its agenda rather than acting on behalf of local needs (Interview 5). This is viewed as a very different approach from other organisations that work on a more technical level and on demands that arrive from the partner countries (Interview 6). The EU is said to be very open to cooperation with 'outsiders' at the operational and technical level, but they are seen as very rigid in terms of their own agenda and the possibility of influencing it (Interview 5). However, it is generally assumed that the relation between external organisations and the

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[8] See for example the narrative renamed 'divisions among member states' in this analysis of EU's changing discursive approach towards asylum seekers (e.g., Vigneri et al. 2023).

EU in Lebanon is at least better than elsewhere in the region, where the EU is even less prone to listening, e.g. in Tunisia (Interviews 3 and 6). The *moral of the story* of this narrative is that the EU actors operating on and in Lebanon should communicate more among themselves and with local actors, so to make more successful decisions both for the Lebanese people and for the EU itself.

Lack of effective strategic communication

Another problem linked to the multidimensional composition of the EU actors dealing with Lebanon is that often the EU's communication towards the Lebanese audience is contradictory or simply lacking. The most recent emblematic example refers to the already mentioned visit of the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to Beirut in May 2024 announcing to pledge 1 billion dollars as socio-economic support to Lebanon (Ayoub 2024). The announcement, made by von der Leyen in tandem with the President of Cyprus, dedicated a large part to how the funds would be used for border control and migration management (European Commission 2024b). In addition to the criticised content of the pledge, the event was considered a huge mediatic blowback for the EU (Stachelhaus 2024). In stressing that the funds were largely aimed at coping with the Syrian refugees and border control, von der Leyen was answering a European need that should have been addressed towards a European audience. In that case, the President did not coordinate with the EU Delegation before making the public announcement, missing an opportunity to frame the discourse in the most appropriate language, which should have taken into consideration the local context and sensitivities (Interview 4).

   This is only a minor example of the communication problems that the EU faces in Lebanon. Indeed, there is also a lack of communication about positive initiatives of the EU, such as the many projects that it has been promoting throughout its many years of presence in Lebanon. Because of the decentralised nature of the funding that involves a myriad of implementing actors, the EU has often missed the opportunity to present its own success stories (Interview 2). The *moral of the story* of this narrative is that the EU should not only do better but also learn to communicate better what it already does.

Conclusions

As shown in the prevailing contesting narratives both among insiders and outsiders, security and border management have taken a central role compared to democracy support and human rights in the EU approach towards Lebanon. This seems to suggest a general lack of learning (Interview 3) by the EU institutions on how to support long-term democratisation reforms rather than focusing on short-term security-oriented patches. The conundrum that emerges is not a new one (EEAS 2016): is the EU a realpolitik actor with specific interests that can disregard values in the name of political interest, or is the EU a value-based actor? This discussion needs to be taken seriously and honestly within the EU and its decision-makers should be aware of the consequences of each choice. One main problem hindering learning is that it will happen only if it is in line with the interests of the EU (and mostly EU member states) (Interview 1). Moreover, this chapter has shown how even contesting voices express very different *morals of the story* with regards to the pragmatic versus normative view, based on the political and professional positioning of contesting actors and more generally their situatedness. Sometimes the EU has been contested for doing too little and sometimes for doing too much in interfering in the domestic politics of Lebanon. Until now, if the EU has indeed learned something, it has learned to be more pragmatic than normative (Interview 7).

The EU's preferred narration is that the year 2005 – because of the popular mobilisation known as the Cedar Revolution – was a moment of opportunity for democratic change in Lebanon, but the opportunity fell with the rise of Hezbollah. Consistently, the narration continues, the EU has adapted its approach from being democracy-led to security-led (with European security concerns at its core). The pressure to criminalise Hezbollah led the EU Council to unanimously agree to put the group's military wing on the list of terrorist organisations in 2013, at the same time however committing itself to keep open contact with all political parties. This shift towards a security-led approach has taken the form of identifying the Lebanese army as the most appropriate recipient of the EU's trust and funds.

However, these shifts have not helped increase the accountability of the Lebanese political parties or in general support more democratisation. As shown, some even argue that the EU's approach to Lebanon has been EU-centred and security-led since the beginning, and it was not the

product of a shift in which the EU had to learn to become more pragmatic because of the Lebanese context.

After 2019, in a new moment of promising protests, the EU has preferred working with civil society organisations rather than with the government, seemingly showing to have learned to avoid fuelling corruption through its own funds. The main problem with this change of approach consists in whether the grassroots organisations are in turn able to effectively influence the Lebanese political context and decision-making (Interview 8). Moreover, in May 2024 the EU again put its own sense of security upfront by returning to promise funds directly to what it has often framed as a corrupted establishment, thus provoking further criticism of the EU's coherence and management of funds.

The lowest moment for the EU in Lebanon that triggered some reflection and discursive change was the May 2024 announcement of the support to Lebanon to keep Syrian refugees there, which was framed by the Commission and the Parliament through normative terms, presenting the issue as a human rights issue, while it was clear to everyone that it was an instance of EU delegating border management to Lebanon. That occasion seemingly triggered learning in the many discussions that took place between the EU institutions and the EU delegation in Beirut after the event (Interviews 4 and 8).

Another small (and interconnected) example of learning seems to have happened after 7 October 2023. Through the youth network of EU Neighbour South, two hundred young people from the region, including Lebanon, wrote a letter to Ursula von der Leyen arguing that the EU statements on Gaza were considered offensive by most people in the Arab world. The letter – which was never published – was taken seriously and high-level meetings were organised to deal with the issue (Interview 3). This was just one example of the great mobilisation and pressure that has been put on the EU institutions since the beginning of the war on Gaza.

On that occasion, learning can be observed in the fact that the main spokesperson for the European Commission on the war has informally changed. Initially, the statements were mostly coming from the President of the Commission, with her strongly criticised 'bias' toward Israel (Wax and Barigazzi 2023) and her May 2024 mediatic missteps in Beirut. Later, it was the outgoing High Representative Josep Borrell who became the most prominent speaker for the EU on the region, and precisely on Lebanon. According to one respondent, Borrell himself seems to have gone

through a process of individual learning since the beginning of the war (Interview 7). He started addressing the Lebanese people in a much more sensitive manner, as was visible in the statement released on 18 September 2024 after the alleged Israeli-led explosion of electronic devices. He called "the indiscriminate method used" as "unacceptable due to the inevitable and heavy collateral damages among civilians", argued that "whoever is behind these attacks aims to spread terror in Lebanon" and called for an independent investigation (EEAS 2024). This language was completely different from the one used by von der Leyen throughout 2023 and 2024.

Despite the minor sparks of learning shown by the European Commission, it seems clearer in the current context that the Commission has even less role than before, as it is the Council and the member states that drive the discussion on how to engage the region more broadly. Moreover, in the Parliament, the political groups have become increasingly aligned with the member states' positions, thus making the discussion on human rights and democracy in Lebanon much more difficult and hijacked by security-dominated discussions (Interview 3).

In the meantime, the possibilities for learning also depend on the architecture of communities of practices and their willingness to engage among themselves. The level of cooperation between actors involved in democracy and human rights promotion in Lebanon and the EU has depended on personal chemistry with the people on the ground in the EU delegation (Interview 5), thus further complicating the fragmentation of decision-making and the possibilities of deep learning.

The role of actors that are neither insiders nor outsiders, like NGOs that have a continuous open discussion with the EU institutions, remains pivotal in triggering possibilities of learning. Advocacy and dialogue stand as ways to exercise influence on EU decision-making, with these independent actors being in a position that allows to present constructive contestation without ever stopping both the cooperation with the EU institutions and with actors on the ground, so to fill the often perceived disconnect between the decisions taken in the HQs and the local realities and needs. As one respondent argues, the continuous pressure on the EU insiders does not mean asking the EU to change its nature or approach but to increase its accountability and respect for the already existing EU treaties and international law (Interview 3).

List of interviews

1. Interview with an independent Brussels-based freelance journalist (online), 2024
2. Interview with respondent 1 at EuroMed Rights (in-person), 2024
3. Interview with respondent 2 at EuroMed Rights (in-person), 2024
4. Interview with a practitioner in strategic communication for the EU-Lebanon (online), 2024
5. Interview with member 1 of the Council of Europe (online), 2024
6. Interview with member 2 of the Council of Europe (online), 2024
7. Interview with a professor specialised in EU-MENA relations and on Lebanon (online), 2024
8. Interview with a Lebanon-based analyst (online), 2024

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3.
European Contestations
of EU Democracy Support in Palestine

Christian Achrainer and Michelle Pace

On 7 October 2023, Hamas and other armed Palestinian groups launched fatal attacks in southern Israel. Since then, the Israeli military has conducted relentless operations in Gaza, killing and injuring tens of thousands of Palestinians. This has brought the "Palestine question" back on the agenda. Inner-EU differences – between EU institutions as well as among EU member states – have become more and more apparent, and an unprecedented Palestinian solidarity movement has emerged within Europe. The 7 October thus had the potential to be a turning point for EU-Palestine relations, including in the field of democracy support.

In this chapter we are guided by the framework provided in Chapter 1 of this volume. However, Palestine is a very specific case, because of the very fact that there is no Palestinian state, because of Israeli occupation, and because of the ongoing violence in the studied period of reflection. Accordingly, not many discursive practices on EU democracy support in a narrow sense could be observed but we had to rather analyse "framework conditions for democracy" as well as the "democraticness" of EU practices. Moreover, democracy support for Palestine cannot be studied without addressing the underlying factors, most importantly the occupation, and we hence included EU discursive practices on Israel, too.

The chapter consists of four parts.[1] Firstly, it outlines the general background of the case study to contextualise developments and narratives since 7 October. Secondly, it maps relevant actors and work out the general contours of their narratives. Thirdly, it analyses some important sub-

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[1] The authors thank Sarah El-Abd for her assistance in the beginning of the research process.

aspects of narratives. Lastly, it provides concluding remarks. In this study, we combine in-depth qualitative analysis of written sources, (EU documents, statements, speeches, press releases, policy briefs, etc.) with semi-directive interviews with EU officials and actors contesting EU narratives.

3.1 Background: Context and pre-7 October narratives

3.1.1 The question of democracy in EU-Palestine relations pre-7 October

As interviewee 3 pointed out, the conditions for democratisation in Palestine are not given, because there are two peoples with very different rights living in the area spanning from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. This is the result of decades-long Israeli occupation and annexation. Israel has kept tight control over the most important governance aspects, settlements have been gradually expanded, and an apartheid system has been established (Amnesty International 2022, HRW 2021). Israeli governments have never shown interest in allowing Palestine to become a (democratic) state, including the new ultra-right government formed by Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu in late 2022.

Against this backdrop, the score of Palestine in the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index has gradually fallen from 6.01 in 2006 to 3.47 in 2023. The last legislative elections in Palestine were held in 2006. While they were largely described by its own observation mission as free and fair, the EU did not recognise the result (i.e., the slight Hamas victory over Fatah). Since then, Hamas has ruled undemocratically in Gaza, and the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) has governed (parts of) the West Bank in an increasingly authoritarian fashion (Amnesty International 2021, Asseburg 2024b). No presidential elections were held since Fatah-leader Mahmoud Abbas was elected in 2005. Thus, the most powerful local actors (i.e., consecutive Israeli governments, Hamas, the PA) have not shown interest in democratisation.

Several interviewees (4, 5, 6, 7) stressed that democratisation has never been a priority for the EU and has not played a major role for discursive and/or behavioural EU practices. In the European Joint Strategy in Support of Palestine, 2021-2024, "Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights" is one of five pillars (European Commission 2020). However, only 25 million euros out of a total of 1.177 billion of EU finances therein are

allocated for this pillar (a mere 2 per cent). At the same time, the EU has long been the biggest donor to the PA and the main provider of aid to Palestine. It allocated 1.28 billion euros under the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) for 2017-2020, and 1.15 billion under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) for 2021-2024.

While the EU has long provided aid, it has never concretely acted upon Palestinians' right to self-determination, despite its rhetorical commitment. Since the 2000s, more and more European policymakers have sided with and supported the Israeli state without any condition relating to the "peace process" and Palestinian statehood (Haddad 2021). Israel was hence successful in decoupling its relations with the EU from the "Palestine question" (Interview 6). Some critics argue that EU democracy support has never been about democratising Palestine but rather about sustaining the status quo of occupation – for which the EU would effectively be paying with its large aid (Dana 2023).

3.1.2 EU narratives and contestation pre-7 October

As several interviewees (4, 5, 6) pointed out, the "Palestine question" has been sidelined in EU discourses in the last decades. Narratives in the pre-7 October period were characterised by continuation, dominated by several ever-recurring themes.

Only few aspects of democracy support in a narrow sense were part of EU narratives. For example, support for civil society organisations (CSOs) has long been named as a key priority, as illustrated in the Joint European Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in Palestine 2018-2020. Therein, the EU highlights that support for CSOs "is all the more important in the absence of functioning democratic governance structures and adequate representation for Palestinians" (European Commission 2019:7). Yet, contesting discursive practices emphasised that the EU does not fund some Palestinian CSOs, as a consequence of Israel's designation of reputable human rights non-governmental organisations as terrorist (Dana 2023). Another common element of the EU narrative has been to call for elections (e.g., HR/VP 2019, European Parliament 2022, Foreign Affairs Council 2023).

Palestinians' right to self-determination has been an integral part of the EU's narrative since the Venice Declaration from 1980 (European Council 1980). The two-state solution mantra has also been part of the

EU's narrative for decades, and respective references can be found in all major strategic security documents, such as the European Security Strategy of 2003 or the Global Strategy of 2016 (Council of the EU 2003, EEAS 2016). This, however, has long been contested by observers who argue that the time for two states is long over (Pace 2010, Slaughter 2013). Some call for one democratic state instead (Karmi 2007, Tilley 2005), others for a confederation (Beilin 2015, Scheindlin and Waxman 2016). Behind closed doors, it has become more and more common among EU officials to regard the two-state solution as "dying in front of our eyes", as one Jerusalem-based EU representative stated in August 2022 (cited in Strömbom and Persson 2023:8).

One notable contestation of the EU's narrative was the description of the reality in Palestine as apartheid, both in reports of human rights organisations (Amnesty International 2022, B'Tselem 2021, HRW 2021) and in Academic scholarship (Waxman 2022, Yiftachel 2005). Such an assessment contests the EU's characteristic description of Israel as the "only democracy in the region", as well as the settler colonial context by evidencing the much bleaker reality on the ground in the occupied Palestinian territories. The EU has largely chosen to ignore these assessments. In a passing comment, the then-HR/VP Josep Borrell answered a question by MEPs in early 2023 saying that "the Commission considers that it is not appropriate to use the term apartheid in connection with the State of Israel" (HR/VP 2023a). Amongst at least some EU officials, however, this is less clear, as one Brussels-based EU official declared in November 2022: "while the EU is not ready to agree on the apartheid narrative, many EU officials recognize many features of apartheid on the ground" (cited in Strömbom and Persson 2023:10; see also Interview 5).

Lastly, already before 7 October, it was clear that positions within the EU differ significantly (Akgül-Açıkmeşe et al. 2023). Lack of unity was exemplified by diverse votes of EU member states in major decisions such as the 2011 UNESCO vote to designate Palestine a full member, or the UN General Assembly vote to upgrade Palestine's status in 2012. Right wing populist parties also contested aspects of the EU's narrative. The Polish PiS, for example, embraced the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem in 2019, which was against the established EU narrative to not recognise Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem (Dyduch and Müller 2021:579-580).

3.2 Actors mapping and general contours of post-7 October narratives

3.2.1 EU narrative(s) and internal contestation

Overall, we observed conflicting discursive practices amongst member states as well as amongst EU institutions and individual office holders. Most interviewees (1, 4, 5, 6, 7) argued that there has not been one coherent EU narrative and that internal divisions became even more apparent since 7 October. According to interviewee 6, this goes as far as questioning long-held common positions, such as not moving embassies to Jerusalem. The reasons for the lack of a common narrative are manifold, and several interviewees (3, 4, 5) emphasised the issue of unanimity in decision-making. In any case, the official EU narrative has often represented the lowest common denominator, showcasing the "paralysis of the EU" (Interview 7). Researchers have equally pointed to EU-internal divisions as a hindrance to joint practices (Achrainer and Pace 2025, Fantappiè and Tocci 2023, Kausch 2024a, Scazzieri 2023, 2024).

In the weeks following 7 October, EU officials performed many discursive practices emphasising the EU's unconditional support for Israel. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stood out in that context, providing clear descriptions of characters, the setting, and the plot: "Israel is a democracy, attacked by Hamas, a terrorist organisation. Israel has the right of self-defence […] And it was clear that, through its terrorist activities, Hamas is also bringing harm to the Palestinian people. Hamas has provoked a humanitarian crisis in Gaza" (European Commission 2023b). On many occasions, she was accompanied by the European Parliament President Roberta Metsola who was equally active in showing support for Israel.

Their stances were contested internally. As Luigi Scazzieri (2023) emphasised, von der Leyen's "initial unwillingness to call on Israel to respect international humanitarian law in its fight against Hamas contrasted sharply with the approach of other EU leaders such as High Representative for foreign policy Josep Borrell". Notably, while von der Leyen and Metsola became quieter over time and hardly performed discursive practices once the suffering of Palestinians became increasingly apparent, Borrell became more outspoken towards the end of his mandate as HR, for example asking for cutting political dialogue with Israel (HR/VP 2024a, 2024h) and being very direct in his criticism of Israel (HR/VP 2024d).

Moreover, EU member states had immense difficulties in reaching any consensus on the Palestine file. According to Martin Konečný (2024), member states can be clustered in three groups: 1) those who back Israel's military campaign without substantive criticism (e.g., Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary); 2) those who call for a ceasefire and criticise Israel (e.g., Belgium, Ireland, Spain); 3) those who hardly perform meaningful discursive practices. Members of the second group are the main internal contesters of the EU's narrative. Irish President Michael D. Higgins, for example, early on made clear that von der Leyen was "not speaking for Ireland" (cited in Wilcock 2023). Spanish Minister for Social Rights Ione Bellara stressed that "the display of hypocrisy, which the European Commission is showing, is unacceptable" (cited in Keeley 2023).

Given the divisions between member states, the European Council often could not agree and hence only produced weak conclusions. In fact, the Council debated terminology for months and remained split over whether to demand a humanitarian pause or a ceasefire, until, in March 2024, it called for "an immediate humanitarian pause leading to a sustainable ceasefire" (European Council 2024a:7). When Josep Borrell proposed sanctions on violent settlers in December 2023, his suggestion was blocked by Hungary and the Czech Republic (Kausch 2024a:6). Votes on UN General Assembly resolutions on Gaza on 27 October 2023 and on 12 December 2023 also showed the deep split amongst EU member states.

In the European Parliament, especially the Leftist Group proposed motions much more critical of Israeli crimes in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank, for example asking for a suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement and referring to apartheid and genocide (European Parliament 2024), hence contesting all four elements of the EU's narrative. Already in the days after 7 October, nine Irish MEPs publicly criticised von der Leyen who has "made the EU look both disjointed and cruel" (cited in Matthews 2023).

Hence, EU-internal divisions have been very apparent from the beginning, and EU leaders have been aware of this. Borrell openly affirmed difficulties in bringing together member states (in the case for example of supporting UNRWA which has been banned by Israeli law from operating in the occupied Palestinian territories): "My job – a difficult one by the way – is to try to put all Member States together in a common position, and I will not contribute to show the divisions amongst us, which are quite clear" (HR/VP 2024b).

3.2.2 External contestation of EU narrative(s)

Many Brussels-based CSOs contested the EU's narrative for not being critical enough of Israel and for not sufficiently recognising Palestinian rights. This includes the European Middle East Project (EuMEP) (and especially its director Martin Konečný), Al Haq Europe, ACT Alliance EU and EuroMed Rights which aims to strengthen "respect for international law, equality and human rights, including Palestinians' right to self-determination, in the EU and Member States' bilateral relations with Israel and the Palestinian Authority".[2] Several large international NGOs, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have also been contesting EU narratives.

The European Coordination of Committees and Associations for Palestine (ECCP) clearly describes the EU as a villain by stating on its website: "The European Union is complicit with the colonial and apartheid regime of the State of Israel, through not respecting its duty of non-recognition and non-assistance of Israeli occupied territories, and through enabling a climate of impunity surrounding the state's actions."[3] The European Palestinian Council for Political Relations (EUPAC) specifically addresses EU institutions and MEPs, and EUPAC Coordinator Ahmed Frassini stresses that "[w]e noticed that we have a massive lack of narration. Pro-Palestinian activists crying and shouting in the streets, in Gaza and the occupied territories, are not the only answer. A lot of the MEPs do not get this kind of message" (interview in Łobodziński 2023).

Some researchers at Brussels-based think tanks produced discursive practices contesting the EU's narrative, too.[4] Julien Barnes-Dacey, Anthon Dworkin and Hugh Lovatt from the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), for example, wrote more than 20 (mainly short) articles. Kristina Kausch from the German Marshall Fund (GMF) and Luigi Scazzieri from the Centre for European Reform each published several articles. Carnegie Europe researchers remained remarkably silent, except for five "Judy Asks"-editions in the Strategic Europe Blog. Other Brussels-based think tanks did not publish anything, including the EU Institute for Security Studies

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[2] EuroMed Rights website: *Israel/Palestine*, https://euromedrights.org/?p=31997.

[3] ECCP website: *About Us*, https://www.eccpalestine.org/?p=768.

[4] Think tanks normally do not take a stance as institutions, but researchers express their personal opinions. Hence, think tanks are not coherent actors, but individual staff members can produce conflicting discursive practices.

(EUISS), the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), the European Policy Centre (EPC), Bruegel and the Jacques Delors Institute. Of the large think tanks based in EU member states, some contributed to the discourse with a few publications, such as the Clingendael Institute in the Netherlands, the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB), Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), or Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP).

Moreover, some media platforms (e.g., *EUobserver* or *Politico*) have been used for contestation by some journalists, such as Shada Islam or David Cronin. The latter has also written dozens of EU-critical blog pieces at *The Electronic Intifada*. Lastly, student activists have been very active, but they hardly addressed EU narratives but rather focused on the positions of their respective universities, demanding an academic boycott (Interviews 1 and 2).

3.3 Selected elements of EU narratives and contestation post-7 October

3.3.1 International law and the rules-based international order

The occupying power's breaches of international law have long been a major obstacle for democratisation in Palestine. Against the backdrop of illegal occupation, settlement development, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, a democracy can hardly develop. To be perceived as a legitimate democracy support actor, the EU must lead by example and respect the rule of (international) law. The rules-based international order is important for all four elements of the narrative: description of character (Are the actors breaking the law described as villains? Are the victims described as such?), setting and plot (Are breaches of international law clearly articulated to describe the situation on the ground?), moral of the story (Does the EU draw adequate conclusions?).

In the days after 7 October, especially von der Leyen and Metsola, stressed Israel's right to defend itself without any restrictions. This was contested by EuroMed Rights (2023):

> It is disturbing that the response from the EU is not a call for de-escalation of violence but rather an unconditional support for Israel's right to defend itself which will be taken as a *carte blanche* [...] The EU should call the Israeli government to strictly abide by international humanitarian law.

Indeed, the EU soon started to speak of "Israel's right to defend itself in line with international law", which was found in almost all analysed documents and includes a clear description of the plot and a characterisation of Israel as the victim. It has, however, remained an empty slogan, because European policymakers have avoided to comment on whether Israel is, in fact, violating international law (Interview 6, Dworkin 2023, Lynch 2024).

Overall, international law has been mentioned in rather vague terms in EU narratives, and the actor breaching international law has been named selectively: While Hamas is called out in almost all documents, Israel is hardly mentioned, suggesting that Israel is solely a victim in the EU's narrative. In many documents, passive language is used, and requests to comply with international law are not explicitly addressed at Israel (HR/VP and DG ECHO 2024a, HR/VP 2024f, European Parliament 2023, European Council 2024a, 2024b). Only Borrell called out Israel by name in several statements (HR/VP 2023b, 2024b, 2024d). Outside actors were much clearer. ACT Alliance EU (2024), for example, urged the EU to take action, arguing that "[d]espite the Israeli government's assurances that it is, and has always been, complying with international law, facts on the ground seem to indicate the contrary".

Within the EU's narrative, the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza was frequently stressed, but there was hardly mention of who is responsible. Most discursive practices did not describe the suffering of Palestinians as the consequence of a human-made international law breach, but often sounded like being made after a natural disaster without a (human) perpetrator (except for Hamas). Israel was not named as the key actor hindering the influx of humanitarian aid in different Council conclusions (European Council 2023a, 2024a, 2024b). In the news section on EU aid for Gaza at the Commission's website, the devastating situation in Palestine is largely portrayed as if no one is "doing" the harm. In many press releases, the word Israel does not even appear, for example in the statement on the risk of famine (HR/VP and DG ECHO 2023) or the statement on attacks against health facilities (HR/VP and DG ECHO 2024b).

EU discursive practices in response to decisions by international courts remained vague, too. After the International Court of Justice (ICJ) requested that Israel must take measures to avoid a genocide, the High Representative and the Commission (2024) only published a very short statement, acknowledging the decision without demanding Israeli com-

pliance. Most EU discursive practices only vaguely stressed that all parties must abide by court decisions (HR/VP and DG ECHO 2024b, European Council 2024a, 2024b). Within the EU, mainly Borrell contested this vagueness, for example after the ICJ ruling that Israel must stop its offensive on Rafah when he asked "the government of Israel to respect fully this Court order" (HR/VP 2024e). Twenty-one MEPs published an open letter on 25 July 2024, urging the EU to acknowledge the ICJ's advisory opinion on the illegality of occupation and to initiate a "drastic change" in EU policies (Strik et al. 2024). Outside actors also contested the EU's reluctance to act upon court orders, for example think tank researchers (Dworkin 2024a and 2024b, Lovatt 2024b and 2024d). Several CSOs signed an open letter demanding that EU member states must implement the ICC arrest warrants (Act Church of Sweden et al. 2024), and in another open letter, CSOs requested that the EU must comply with the ICJ advisory opinion on the illegality of occupation (Al Haq et al. 2024).

A similar pattern can be observed in the way in which the EU reacted to Israeli disrespect for the UN. The European Council (2024b:5), for example, "stresses that the services UNRWA provides in Gaza and across the region are essential and condemns any attempts to label a UN agency as a terrorist organisation", but it does not say who tries to do so. After the Knesset adopted a law banning UNRWA from operating in Israel, the EU released a statement, emphasising the importance on UNRWA, without asking Israel to revoke the law (HR/VP 2024g). This weak response was contested by some, such as EuroMed Rights (Ben Jemia and Boserup 2024).

Several actors contested the lack of meaningful action and hence the moral of the story, demanding a review of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. In March 2024, the Foreign Affairs Council (2024) solely reported on the "exchange of views on the EU-Israel Association Agreement", but most member states rejected a substantial review. This, however, was a demand of several researchers (Barnes-Dacey and Lovatt 2024, Lovatt 2024a) as well as CSOs (ACT Alliance EU 2024, EuroMed Rights 2024), many of whom signed respective open letters on 12 March 2024, on 26 August and on 19 September (ActionAid et al. 2024, AEJ et al. 2024, ECCP et al. 2024).

3.3.2 Palestinian statehood and the right to self-determination

The right to self-determination is a core democratic principle, and establishing a democratic system without a state and under occupation is impossible. Hence, the right to self-determination is clearly connected to EU

democracy support and is related to the four aspects of narratives: character (Who is hindering Palestinian statehood? Which actors are legitimate representatives?), setting and plot (How is the situation on the ground described?), moral of the story (What should the EU do?).

Shortly after 7 October, Ursula von der Leyen has on several occasions not mentioned Palestinian statehood and the EU's support for a two-state solution when addressing the conflict (Barigazzi and Sorgi 2023). In response, 798 staff members of the Commission wrote a letter, asking von der Leyen to stress the right of Palestinian self-determination. Overall, the two-state solution mantra has been upheld, however. On 15 October, the European Council (2023b) stated: "We remain committed to a lasting and sustainable peace based on the two-state solution." Comparable statements were made by all EU institutions (European Commission 2024, European Parliament 2023, European Council 2024a, Foreign Affairs Council 2024). Nevertheless, the EU still does not recognise Palestine as a state and argues that this should only be done with Israeli approval and as part of an agreed upon political settlement.

Being dissatisfied with EU inaction, Ireland, Spain and Slovenia decided to recognise Palestine in May/June 2024, and several researchers called upon the EU to do so as well (Bargués and Bourekba 2024, Lovatt 2024b and 2024d, most experts in Dempsey 2024). Yet, the feasibility of the two-state solution has remained contested, for example by most contributors to a "Judy Asks" piece (Dempsey 2023). Some observers argued that "the EU has [solely paid] lip service to the two-state-solution" (Kausch 2024a). Others pointed out "that the Palestinian right to self-determination is not conditional upon Israeli approval, nor upon the outcome of negotiations" (Lovatt 2024d). This point is crucial, because consecutive Israeli governments have been very clear in their rejection of a Palestinian state (EFE 2024). In July 2024, the Knesset overwhelmingly voted in favour of a respective resolution, which remarkably did not trigger any substantial EU reaction.

The 7 October has revived debates about the governance of Palestine. The EU has been very clear that Hamas cannot be involved (Lazaroff 2023) and still regards the PA as the only legitimate (and feasible) representation of Palestinians (HR/VP 2019, European Council 2023a, 2023b, 2024b). In July 2024, the Commission and the PA signed a letter of intent on budgetary support aimed at "stabilising the Palestinian Authority" (European Commission 2024). Some observers see the PA more critically,

and interviewee 7 argued that supporting the PA has always meant cementing the status quo (i.e., to normalise the occupation). Others argue that there will be no way to not integrate Hamas somehow (Asseburg 2024c, Lovatt 2024b).

The EU demands reforms of the PA, however. Borrell said that "we need to invest on making the Palestinians Authority and bodies more democratic and legitimate and more efficient" (HR/VP 2024d). In a letter of intent from July 2024, the EU declared that "[a]ll disbursements will be based on the Palestinian Authority's progress towards the agreed-upon reform milestones" (European Commission 2024). Hence, aid is conditioned, but as interviewee 6 emphasised, this mainly refers to security and administrative reforms but not democratic reforms. This is contested by some who argue that "the EU will have to apply conditionality to its support of the PA in order to press for judicial independence, the reinstatement of the Palestinian Legislative Council, and the rule of law" (Asseburg 2024c:5; see also Barnes-Dacey and Lovatt 2023).

Remarkably, the EU narrative did hardly include calls for elections, which had been a common feature before 7 October. One Commission official from DG NEAR told interviewee 3 that most in the EU would not regard this to be the right time for elections, and interviewee 5 said that EU officials would be afraid of the outcome: Polls show that Palestinians are dissatisfied with the PA, while support for Hamas has grown (PSR 2024). Ignoring Palestinians' preferences, however, means to not acknowledge their right of self-determination, which is so crucial for democracy that interviewees 5 and 6 argued that the EU should address this issue much more directly in its democracy support narratives. Some scholars suggested that the "EU could also take the lead in supporting a path towards elections" (Asseburg 2024c:5; see also Lovatt 2024b).

3.3.3 Financial assistance and civil society support

Supporting CSOs has long been a key instrument of EU democracy support, and it is one of the few direct democracy support practices which can be observed. Assistance more generally can also be an important democracy support practice. Again, all four aspects of narratives are concerned: character (Are CSOs described as heroes or villains, and by whom?), plot and setting (What is the role CSOs are expected to play?), moral of the story (Which CSOs should the EU support and how?).

In the days after 7 October, a lot of confusion existed surrounding the issue of funding. On 9 October, Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi declared on Twitter the suspension of all EU aid to Palestine (Konečný 2023). The Commission (2023a) – later the same day – released a press release rejecting this announcement declaring instead an urgent review to "ensure that no EU funding indirectly enables any terrorist organization to carry out attacks against Israel". This announcement signalled that all Palestinian actors, including CSOs which are normally contemplated as key drivers of democratisation, are considered as potential villains. This was contested by interviewee 6 who argued that such a general scepticism towards CSOs would not be helpful for democratisation.

EuroMed Rights initiated an open letter to MEPs in March 2024, contesting the idea to making funds more conditional (EuroMed Rights et al. 2024), and in another open letter, some 100 NGOs contested the review of funding and challenged the general suspicion surrounding this review: "The recent announcements by several European donors and the EU itself, implicitly endorse Israel's unfounded allegations of Palestinian NGOs as having terrorist links" (ActionAid et al. 2023). Sometimes, contesters linked the review to EU-Israel relations, questioning the moral of the story, such as EuroMed Rights (2023) which recommends "that the announced EU review of its aid to the Palestinian Authority is extended to include a full review of the EU's political, economic and military engagement with Israel". Writing for ACT Alliance EU, Mélina Chaput (2024) criticises the EU's "politicisation of aid". Defunding of UNRWA was a specifically contested case, with many observers stressing that UNRWA is a hero, not a villain (Asseburg 2024a, Lovatt 2024c, Petillo 2024).

Conclusion

Overall, the EU narrative has not changed significantly since 7 October, as also stressed by many interviewees (2, 4, 5, 7). Several ever-occurring discursive practices have been continuously reproduced, yet many have remained rather empty slogans without much substance. Moreover, the narrative has ignored many important aspects – silence can also be a discursive practice – and the EU seemed unwilling to acknowledge "uncomfortable truths". For example, Israel is not labelled as a villain who breaks international law and is responsible for human suffering, and (non-Hamas) Palestinians are not solely regarded as victims but potentially as villains.

The issues of occupation, apartheid, Israeli rejection of Palestinian statehood, settlements and creeping annexations, etc. are not sufficiently includeed in EU narratives, leaving the setting and plot elements underexposed to these uncomfortable truths. For the moral of the story, this means that the EU does not (have to) consider these issues and can support Israel largely unconditionally.

The missing elements in EU narratives have led to lacking meaningful discursive as well as behavioural practices, or as Kristina Kausch (2024b) has called it "unprincipled paralysis on Gaza". Josep Borrell equally emphasised EU inaction: "Every day we call for a two-state solution, but as the Palestinian representative told me during the UN General Assembly: 'Apart from calling for it, what are you doing to get it?'" (HR/VP 2023b).

During the period of reflection, which is still ongoing, the EU narrative has been increasingly contested, both internally as well as by outside actors. The main role of contestation seems to be to lay bare uncomfortable truths to the public as well as EU officials, hence making it more difficult to avoid engaging with them. Indeed, according to interviewee 4, there seems to be increasing awareness within EU institutions that things have long gone too far and cannot be ignored any more. This could be a starting point for learning. Currently, however, many indicators rather point to a continuation of non-learning, and policymakers once again appear to prioritise other issues over democracy support and Palestinian rights (Interviews 5, 6, 7). Moreover, some powerful actors try to prevent the laying bare of uncomfortable truths by silencing contesting voices, for example when invitations for public appearances are cancelled, when street protests are contained, or when individuals feel that their job or funding is at risk.

As a result of EU malpractices as described in this chapter, the EU has, in the eyes of many, lost credibility and legitimacy as a democracy support actor (Interviews 1, 2, 5, 7). One reason is obvious hypocrisy: "Never has there been such a sorry display of European double standards than in the parallel wars unfolding in Ukraine and the Middle East today, confirming all the criticism and stereotypes about Europe, from its racism to its Eurocentrism and neocolonial practices" (Fantappiè and Tocci 2023). Surely, the EU has long been seen as a toothless actor in the context of the "Palestine question", but now it has the image of a villain – this is a dramatic development which will impact EU democracy support for decades, not only in Palestine (Interviews 1, 2, 7).

List of interviews

1. Interview with a student activist (in-person), 27 November 2024
2. Interview with an activist (in-person), 29 November 2024
3. Interview with a scholar and activist (online), 4 December 2024
4. Interview with a European Commission official (online), 6 December 2024
5. Interview with a former European Commission official (in-person), 9 December 2024
6. Interview with a researcher at major European think tank (online), 13 December 2024
7. Interview with a researcher at major European think tank (online), 16 December 2024

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4.
European Contestations
of EU Democracy Support in Tunisia

Vladimir Blaiotta

Among all the North African and Middle Eastern countries that underwent a process of political renewal in 2011, Tunisia emerged at first as the sole success story. The country distinguished itself through active popular participation, the swift establishment of formal democratic structures, and the relative absence of violent turmoil or immediate democratic backsliding, especially when compared to other nations undergoing political upheavals in the region during the early 2010s (Johansson-Nogués and Rivera Escartin 2020). The European Union welcomed Tunisia's democratic efforts with great interest and focused its resources on supporting the country's democratic transition in a region marked by significant instability (European Commission 2011).

The wave of political upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East in the early 2010s, by the EU's own admission, represented an opportunity to rethink its approach to "democracy support", which had been established in the post-Cold War period and intensified in the Southern neighbourhood through programmes such as the 1994 European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the 2000 ACP-EU Partnership Agreement (also known as the Cotonou Agreement) and the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (Slocum-Bradley and Bradley 2013). Prior to these events, EU democratic support primarily consisted of technical assistance for formal democratic functions. However, this approach was often limited to electoral assistance and capacity building, without fully addressing the specific needs of partner countries, which may have constrained the overall effectiveness of EU democracy support (Huber 2008).

The EU immediate response to the Arab Spring was to launch the Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity in 2011 (European Commission 2011), which was initially focused on Tunisia, Egypt and other ENP countries undergoing transitions. This framework introduced a more explicit conditionality mechanism, offering increased financial assistance, trade concessions and mobility agreements in exchange for tangible democratic reforms. The EU sought to differentiate this phase from previous efforts by linking democracy support more directly to economic and governance incentives, a principle further reinforced in the 2011 revision of the ENP, which explicitly incorporated the "more for more" principle (European Commission, *European Neighbourhood Policy*) – rewarding countries that demonstrated commitment to democratic reforms. As Tunisia's transition progressed, the EU adapted its instruments accordingly, expanding its engagement beyond short-term support to more structured and long-term cooperation mechanisms. The EU-Tunisia Partnership Priorities (2013-2017) (EEAS 2013) and its corresponding Action Plan marked the beginning of a second phase, shifting the focus towards institutional reforms and capacity-building efforts. This phase represented a more tailored, country-specific approach aimed at fostering decentralisation, judicial independence and civil society participation. Central to this effort was the European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI), which allocated 31 million euros to support governance improvements and institutional strengthening, ensuring a more structured and sustainable democratic transition.

Over the years, cooperation between the EU and Tunisia in the security sector has steadily gained momentum. This shift reflects a broader pattern in the EU's engagement with third countries, particularly with its southern neighbours and their regional counterparts, where security concerns have increasingly shaped bilateral and multilateral cooperation (do Céu Pinto Arena 2024). This approach reflects a recurring dilemma in EU external relations: balancing long-term objectives, such as democratic advancement, with short-term priorities, often centred on ensuring stability in third countries. In framing issues such as migration and terrorism, the EU has predominantly pursued an approach centred on strengthening Tunisia's security sector through targeted measures, strategic funding and institutional cooperation (Maryon 2024). This strategy has allowed the EU to externalise the management of these challenges, particularly in response to mounting pressure from far-right parties and the

inability to develop a unified and collective migration policy within its member states (Kaunert et al. 2022). At the same time, as evidenced during past cooperation with the Ben Ali regime, security collaboration has also provided local governments with greater stability, reinforcing their capacity to exert control over civil society and suppress political opposition (Cassarino 2014). These efforts were explicitly outlined in the EU-Tunisian strategic priorities for the period 2018-2020 (EU-Tunisia Association Council 2018). However, in many cases, the emphasis on enhancing the efficiency of the security sector has come at the expense of democratic principles in Tunisia, particularly in relation to human rights protections, as will be further explored in this chapter. The discursive narratives surrounding the European Union's role in supporting democracy in Tunisia have revealed a continuous tension between two above mentioned dominant frames. While the EU has maintained a rhetorical commitment to democratic values, the way this commitment has been articulated within public and institutional debates has shifted, reflecting underlying political and strategic considerations.

4.1 Framing the democratic backsliding in Tunisia

The democratic backsliding in Tunisia took place progressively. On 25 July 2021, President Kaïs Saïed, citing the government's failure to tackle corruption, took decisive action by suspending Parliament, removing the Prime Minister and consolidating nearly all executive powers within his control (Yerkes and Alhomoud 2022). In the following months, Saïed's centralisation of power took an increasingly assertive trajectory: he extended control over the judiciary, cracked down on independent media and restricted civil society organisations (Yerkes and Alhomoud 2022). In addition to that, Saïed promoted a referendum to change the 2014 Constitution, introducing a presidential system that grants the President full control over both the executive and judicial branches, while significantly reducing the Parliament's authority (Amnesty International 2022).

This chapter examines the discursive contestation surrounding the EU's democracy support practices in Tunisia, focusing on perspectives from both insiders and outsiders within the EU. The analysis is grounded in the conceptual framework provided by Chapter 1. To achieve this, the chapter analyses thirteen motions for resolutions in the European Parliament, six parliamentary debates and more than forty articles and op-eds

from relevant human rights organisations, news outlets and think tanks. The timeframe under analysis spans from 2021, following the initial stages of Saïed's democratic backsliding, to 2023, in the aftermath of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed between the EU and Tunisia. Structuring the timeline in this way enables a comprehensive examination of the evolution of contestation practices, beginning with the political crisis triggered by Saïed, followed by a phase of reflection and culminating in the signing of the MoU, which signals an implicit EU stance on Tunisia's democratic trajectory. This study employs qualitative discourse analysis, focusing on two distinct narrative frameworks. The first, referred to as the *incremental narrative of contestation*, reflects the perspective that the EU should continue its democracy support measures, making refinements without fundamentally altering its approach. The underlying message of this narrative is that the EU should intensify its efforts to prevent further democratic backsliding. The second framework consists of narratives that directly attribute responsibility to the EU for Tunisia's democratic decline. From this perspective, actors argue that the deterioration of democratic standards is a direct consequence of the EU's policies, which have failed to deliver the expected positive impact on Tunisia's democratic framework. The findings demonstrate that while contesting narratives from the progressive camp have shifted from framing Saïed as the villain to increasingly holding the European Union responsible for Tunisia's democratic backsliding, it is the pragmatic contestations that gain traction within the EU's decision-making space and ultimately shape its external actions.

4.2 The incremental narrative

4.2.1 Empowering civil society

In this initial phase of contestation, which emerged in October 2021 following President Saïed's suspension of parliament, the debate centred on the EU's need to reinforce its dialogue with Tunisian civil society. This approach was seen as essential for ensuring continuity in the EU's democratic support, even in the face of Saïed's actions. The Verts/ALE parliamentary group actively promoted this strategy, emphasising the importance of maintaining democratic engagement despite Tunisia's evolving political landscape (European Parliament 2021a).

This position was further reinforced by calls for the resumption of the "Tripartite Dialogue" between the EU, Tunisian authorities and civil society – an initiative designed to reaffirm civil society's role as a counterbalance to Saïed's growing authority (European Parliament 2021a). Within this framework, the EU's narrative followed an incremental logic, portraying democracy as a shared objective between the EU and Tunisian civil society. The EU's role was not fundamentally questioned but rather seen as requiring expansion to enhance its impact. Civil society was framed as the hero, entrusted with safeguarding democratic principles, while Saïed's government was implicitly cast as the villain, obstructing democratic progress.

However, as the Tunisian crisis deepened, this initially optimistic narrative began to shift. A key turning point occurred on 25 July 2022, when Tunisia held a constitutional referendum promoted by President Saïed following a two-month online public consultation. The proposed constitutional changes established a presidential system that granted the President full control over both the executive and judicial branches while significantly diminishing the authority of Parliament (Amnesty International 2022). For this reason, in October 2022, during a parliamentary debate on Tunisia, Emmanuel Maurel, a member of the Verts/ALE group, reaffirmed the importance of supporting Tunisian civil society as a means of sustaining the EU's commitment to democracy (European Parliament 2022). At the same time, he underscored the EU's limitations in effectively shaping the country's political trajectory. On one hand, he acknowledged the complexity of the situation, pointing to the Tunisian population's growing disillusionment and the potentially severe repercussions of imposing sanctions. On the other, he depicted the EU as lacking the capacity to intervene in a way that could meaningfully alter Tunisia's course of events (European Parliament 2022).

By 2023, this trajectory of disillusionment continued, as emphasised by MEP Mounir Satouri (Verts/ALE) during another parliamentary debate, where he urged the EU to adopt a more proactive approach in addressing Tunisia's worsening democratic crisis (European Parliament 2023). However, while criticisms of the EU's lack of strategic direction intensified, no clear alternative vision was articulated beyond the continued reliance on civil society. This shift in discourse reflects a broader tension between the EU's normative aspirations and its practical constraints: early discussions framed EU support as a necessary expansion of its role, while later interventions exposed the growing scepticism about its actual capacity to shape democratic outcomes in Tunisia.

4.2.2 Pragmatic narrative

While the above-mentioned contestation emphasises the need for a stronger commitment to rule of law and democratic principles, an alternative perspective has emerged over time, prioritising Tunisia's stability for security and geopolitical reasons. This pragmatic approach suggests that a singular focus on democracy promotion may undermine the EU's broader interests in the Mediterranean region, particularly in managing migration, trade, and energy security.

Within this narrative of contestation the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue is portrayed as the central moral of the story, envisioned as the key mechanism for stabilising Tunisia while maintaining the EU's influence in the region. This is particularly evident in Vincenzo Sofo's position (ECR), articulated in a 2021 parliamentary debate, where he called for a shared EU-Tunisia agenda centred on economic and security cooperation (European Parliament 2021b). According to Sofo, framing the EU-Tunisia dialogue around these key issues was intended to prevent Tunisia from following Libya's trajectory – descending into instability and falling under the control of unspecified foreign powers that could weaken the EU's access to energy resources and security partnerships.

From this perspective, the villains are external actors seeking to increase their presence in Tunisia at the expense of the EU's influence. However, in some instances, the EU is portrayed as both a victim of external interferences and of its own missteps, particularly if its engagement with Tunisia remains excessively focused on democracy promotion while neglecting broader geopolitical imperatives.

This narrative was further reinforced in parliamentary debates in 2022 and 2023, particularly through Thierry Mariani's statements on behalf of the ID group. Here, Tunisia's stability is positioned as a prerequisite for safeguarding European interests, particularly in security and migration management. President Kaïs Saïed is framed as the hero, undertaking the necessary task of restoring order in a fragile and fragmented political system. In this context, democratic backsliding is not viewed as a failure but as a necessary corrective measure to rebuild state authority and ensure Tunisia's long-term stability (European Parliament 2022).

Furthermore, the Islamist party Ennahda is explicitly cast as the villain, with its influence depicted as a destabilising force. In contrast, Saïed's government is portrayed as actively working to combat Islamist influence and re-establish Tunisia's international financial relations,

reinforcing his role as a stabilising force rather than an authoritarian threat (European Parliament 2022).

A core argument underpinning this perspective is the rejection of Western democracy promotion as an effective model for Tunisia. Drawing on the failures of EU-backed interventions in Libya, Egypt and Syria, this narrative presents democracy support as a disruptive and ultimately de-stabilising force that has contributed to regional chaos rather than sustainable (European Parliament 2023).

4.3 Tunisia backsliding with EU complicity?

The signing of the MoU between the European Union and Tunisia in 2023 marked a significant shift in EU-Tunisia relations. Framed as a strategic measure to enhance migration control, the agreement provided substantial financial assistance to Tunisia to curb irregular migration flows, aligning with the EU's broader policy of externalising border management (European Union and Tunisia 2023). However, the agreement emerged in a politically fraught context. On one hand, the sharp increase in migrant arrivals in Lampedusa had reignited political pressure in Italy and across Europe, leading to calls for stronger cooperation with Southern Mediterranean states to contain irregular migration (ECRE 2023). On the other, serious human rights concerns arose as images circulated of Tunisian police forces violently expelling migrants into the desert along the Libyan border (Amara 2023), accompanied by openly xenophobic rhetoric from President Kaïs Saïed (Amnesty International 2023). This dual reality – growing political demands for stricter migration control in Europe and the evident violations of migrant rights in Tunisia – set the stage for an intense contestation of the MoU by multiple European political actors, particularly within the European Parliament. The debate reflected deeper tensions between the EU's geopolitical pragmatism and its normative commitment to human rights and democracy, questioning whether the agreement aligned with the Union's foundational principles or represented a capitulation to authoritarian pressures.

Within this framework, a notable shift in perspective can be observed among socialist and progressive members of the European Parliament regarding the situation in Tunisia. Prior to the signing of the MoU, debates were marked by a sense of optimism, with the EU still perceived as having the capacity to counter Saïed's policies and support democracy through enhanced efforts (European Parliament 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023). How-

ever, following the signing of the MoU, the EU is increasingly portrayed as directly responsible for Tunisia's democratic backsliding, rather than as a force capable of mitigating it.

Firstly, the failure of past border externalisation policies was a key point of contention, particularly among members of the S&D group such as Brando Benifei and Pietro Bartolo (European Parliament 2023). They criticised the effectiveness of outsourcing migration control, drawing on past experiences in Libya, where similar agreements had failed to curb migration while leading to widespread human rights abuses. They warned that the EU-Tunisia agreement was repeating the same mistakes, reinforcing authoritarian governance without achieving tangible results. Secondly, critics denounced the EU's direct complicity in Tunisia's authoritarian shift. By signing an agreement with no clear democratic or human rights conditionality, the EU was seen as providing financial and political support to a repressive system rather than using its leverage to demand governance reforms. At the same time, MEPs from the Verts/ALE group, including Tineke Strik and Mounir Satouri, alongside The Left's Malin Björk (European Parliament 2023), framed the agreement as a betrayal of the EU's historical mission of democracy support. By endorsing inhumane pushbacks and legitimising Saïed's regime, the EU was no longer acting as a democracy supporter but as an actor willing to compromise fundamental values for strategic gains.

The contestation of the EU-Tunisia MoU reflects a fundamental transformation in the discourse on EU democracy support. While earlier critiques (European Parliament 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023) focused on the insufficiency or inefficacy of EU actions in fostering democracy, the current debate increasingly casts the EU as the villain in Tunisia's democratic decline. The EU is no longer portrayed as failing to do enough; it is now accused of doing harm, shifting from a benevolent but ineffective actor to an active enabler of authoritarian rule. This transformation underscores a broader crisis in the EU's external governance model, particularly in its Southern neighbourhood. By prioritising security cooperation – particularly in reducing migration flows to Europe – as a precondition for engagement in other policy areas, the EU risks sidelining human rights and weakening institutional checks and balances. Tunisia serves as a clear example of this dynamic, which ultimately pushes recipient states further away from the democratic objectives that the EU claims to uphold in its normative role on the international stage.

The above-mentioned contestation to the MoU revealed a deep contestation of the traditional narrative surrounding EU engagement in Tunisia. Critics challenged the usual portrayal of the EU as a champion of democracy and framed its role in a different light. In this revised narrative, President Kaïs Saïed emerged as an autocratic leader, leveraging migration control to consolidate political power while enforcing repressive measures against both political opposition and migrants. However, within this discourse, the EU itself was not merely a passive actor but was increasingly depicted as complicit in legitimising and strengthening Saïed's rule. The agreement was framed as an explicit recognition of his regime, leading to a shift in the EU's positioning from democracy supporter to enabler of authoritarian governance. Migrants and asylum seekers, particularly those from sub-Saharan Africa, were portrayed as the primary victims of this agreement, exposed to violent pushbacks, police brutality and racial discrimination in Tunisia. More broadly, the Tunisian population itself was also described as suffering from a wider authoritarian turn, exacerbated by EU policies that prioritised migration control over democratic development. The EU, rather than being seen as merely ineffective in supporting democracy, was actively accused of facilitating the erosion of democratic norms by legitimising Saïed's actions in exchange for cooperation on migration control.

Beyond the criticism voiced within the European Parliament, the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding has also been contested by a broader network of actors, particularly human rights organisations and advocacy groups. Amnesty International (Geddie 2023), EuroMed Rights (2023) and Human Rights Watch (Dam 2023) have strongly denounced the EU's complicity in human rights violations against migrants, reinforcing concerns already raised in political debates. However, an additional layer of contestation emerged from an outsider critique published by *Politico* in September 2023, further expanding the debate (Francavilla 2023).

Against this framework the MoU is not merely contested on ethical and human rights grounds; it is also framed as a reflection of the EU's internal crisis in migration governance. This critique operates on multiple levels. Firstly, the agreement is seen as a symptom of the EU's failure to implement a comprehensive migration policy, with institutions favouring short-term containment strategies over sustainable solutions. The reliance on third countries for migration control replicates previous policy failures, such as those seen in Libya and Turkey, reinforcing a pattern of dependency on authoritarian regimes rather than fostering effective regional cooperation (Francavilla 2023).

Secondly, the contestation highlights how the EU's increasing alignment with far-right narratives on migration has contributed to its own internal instability. By adopting a security-driven approach, EU institutions have legitimised demagogic discourses that portray migration as an existential threat, further empowering far-right forces across Europe. This has led to a cycle of political reinforcement, where mainstream parties, in an attempt to counterbalance the rise of the far right, have paradoxically absorbed their rhetoric, shaping policies that prioritise restrictive border control over rights-based governance (Francavilla 2023).

Lastly, the EU's decision-making mechanisms themselves are called into question, particularly the continued reliance on unanimity in key policy areas. The MoU is emblematic of a broader institutional deadlock, where political fragmentation prevents the adoption of coherent and principled migration strategies. As a result, the EU is portrayed not only as actively endorsing migration externalisation but also as trapped in a system that renders it unable to effectively address the root causes of migration and uphold its normative commitments (Francavilla 2023).

The contestation surrounding the EU-Tunisia MoU reveals a fundamental transformation in the discourse on EU migration governance, moving beyond criticisms of policy inefficacy to a more structural critique of the EU's internal contradictions and declining normative power. The EU is no longer simply seen as failing to protect human rights; rather, it is depicted as actively contributing to the erosion of the very principles it claims to uphold.

Conclusions

An analysis of the EU's approach to democratic backsliding in Tunisia reveals a clear shift toward pragmatism, driven by the imperative to safeguard security policy objectives that have increasingly shaped its external governance. In this context, the MoU fully embodies this strategic orientation. The period of reflection between Saïed's democratic rollback in 2021 and 2023, which could have served as a moment of reckoning and prompted a fundamental reassessment of the EU's democracy support role, instead reinforced a decisive departure from its traditional commitment to democracy support. As a result, the most influential voices now advocate for an external governance approach aligned with global trends in international politics – characterised by intensifying geopolitical competition and a growing emphasis on realpolitik.

This recalibration is notably driven by the increasingly influential conservative parties, whose voices have played a pivotal role in shaping the EU's evolving stance. As things stand, democracy support appears as an ineffective as a tool for advancing the EU's strategic objectives, which now seem more attainable through a dialogue centred on stabilising ruling regimes in countries like Tunisia. Consequently, progressive forces – both within and outside EU institutions – have intensified their contestation of the EU's role. This shift has unfolded alongside a dual process of political regression in EU-Tunisia relations: while the MoU has reaffirmed the EU's strategic priorities, Saïed has simultaneously tightened his grip on power, further eroding democratic space within the country.

In response, some members of the European Parliament have called for closer collaboration with Tunisian civil society, signalling not only a refusal to legitimise Saïed but also an acknowledgment of the impossibility of engaging in a meaningful dialogue on democracy with his regime. The fading of 2011 – once regarded as a defining moment for Tunisia's democratic trajectory – from certain contestation narratives reflects a broader transformation in how these debates are framed. The evolving dynamics of EU-Tunisia relations during this period raise fundamental questions about the actual influence of contestation in EU policymaking.

The signing of the MoU by von der Leyen, alongside Rutte and Meloni, underscores a growing shift in engagement with Tunisia – one increasingly led by individual member states rather than the EU as a unified actor. This shift is further reinforced at the operational level, where the mechanism for dialogue on security has been structured externally to the EU, weakening both its supervisory structures and its adherence to the core principles it nominally upholds.

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5.

European Contestations of EU Democracy Support in Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine

Nona Mikhelidze, Andrea Gawrich, Fabian Schöppner,
Anna Osypchuk and Anton Suslov

The recent history of Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine offers critical case studies for examining EU democracy support. Over the past decade, number of revolutionary events have marked significant turning points in the democratic trajectory of these countries and have triggered periods of reflection within the EU. These moments allow the EU to assess events, evaluate their approaches and consider possible adjustments. Such periods of reflection may or may not lead to meaningful (un)learning or changes in discourse and behaviour.

Against this backdrop and in line with the introductory conceptual chapter of this volume, key questions arise: To what extent did this reflection result in "self-enlightenment" and tangible changes? Which actors altered their (discursive) practices, and why? The broader question is: Can the EU evolve into a learning institution capable of recognising the need for, and the value of, (un)learning its deeply embedded approaches to democracy support in its eastern neighbourhood?

To explore these questions, this chapter examines if and how various actors within the EU as a "multilevel polity" have assessed, represented and contested pivotal events in the case countries.[1] This includes analysing the EU's democracy-related policy responses and the extent to which these events led to internalised changes at the political discourse level. Which actors participate in contestation, and who acts as gatekeepers?

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[1] The case study on Armenia was authored by Andrea Gawrich and Fabian Schöppner. The case study on Georgia by Nona Mikhelidze. The case study on Ukraine was written by Anna Osypchuk and Anton Suslov.

Who is heard, who speaks but is ignored, and who is actively silenced? Beyond the powerful voices of EU institutions like the European Council, the Council of the EU, the European Commission and European Parliament, which other actors (e.g., civil society organisations, think tanks, businesses, lobby groups) have access to contestation?

5.1 Historical turning points in Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine

In June 2022, while Ukraine and Moldova were granted EU candidate status, Georgia received only a European perspective accompanied by a list of 12 conditions. Brussels explained this decision by pointing out that, although Georgia performed comparably to Ukraine and Moldova in the technical implementation of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, its democratic credentials and progress toward democratic transition lagged significantly. By autumn 2023, the European Commission reported that Georgia had fulfilled only three of the 12 conditions. Key areas such as de-oligarchisation, depolarisation, judicial reform and others requiring substantial political will remained largely unaddressed (European Commission 2023b).

However, in December 2023, despite falling short of the EU's conditions for candidate status, Tbilisi was unexpectedly granted the designation (European Council 2023). This decision bolstered the ruling Georgian Dream party while undermining efforts for meaningful democratic reform. Rather than spurring progress, the EU's failure to enforce conditionality effectively backfired. The Georgian government interpreted candidate status as validation of its approach, intensifying authoritarian measures. It reintroduced the controversial "foreign agents' law" (dubbed the "Russian law") and proposed anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, drawing stark parallels with regressive policies seen in Russia. These moves triggered mass protests across Georgia and drew widespread condemnation from the European Union, individual member states and international human rights organisations. In response, Brussels began discussing the possibility of halting Georgia's EU integration process. Protests temporarily subsided in anticipation of the October 2024 parliamentary elections, as many hoped that a democratic change of government could address the country's political crisis. However, those hopes were dashed. The ruling party orchestrated massive electoral fraud and, soon after the elections, announced the suspension of Georgia's EU integration process. This move

was unconstitutional, violating Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution, which mandates every government to uphold the country's Euro-Atlantic integration path.

The announcement sparked an unprecedented wave of nationwide protests, uniting generations and regions under a single demand: new parliamentary elections; the scale and intensity of these protests reflecting not only the profound discontent with the ruling party's actions against Georgia's path towards the EU but also the widespread desire for a return to democratic norms and constitutional governance.

Thus June 2022, December 2023 and October 2024 – along with the ongoing protests – mark pivotal turning points in Georgia's democratic transition as well as in the EU's approach to supporting democracy in the country.

Armenia's modern history has been shaped by several pivotal turning points that have redefined its political trajectory. In 2013, after years of negotiations, Armenia unexpectedly decided not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. Instead, it pivoted toward deeper integration with Russia by choosing to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) alongside Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia. Armenia's foreign policy U-turn, however, took place under heavy pressure from Russia with whom Armenia already cooperated in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) (Delcour 2018). Despite this dramatic pivot from Brussels, Armenia managed to continue along a kind of silent Europeanisation trajectory (Delcour and Wolczuck 2015).

A significant moment came in November 2017 with the signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the European Union. This agreement allowed Armenia to strengthen economic and political ties with the EU while maintaining its commitments to the EAEU. CEPA symbolised Armenia's attempt to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy, seeking cooperation with Europe without severing ties with Russia.

However, the growing dissatisfaction with the internal policy of Sargsyan led to the Velvet Revolution in April and May of 2018. A peaceful uprising, spearheaded by opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan, resulted in the resignation of Sargsyan and a dramatic shift in Armenia's political landscape. For the first time since gaining independence, Armenia saw a transition of power driven by popular demand rather than elite manoeuvring, bringing renewed hopes for democratic reform.

The country's security challenges remained unresolved, though. In 2020, a war erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, reigniting a long-standing conflict. The fighting, which lasted from September to November, ended with Azerbaijan regaining large parts of the disputed territory (Yavuz and Gunter 2022). The loss was a devastating blow to Armenia, both politically and militarily, forcing it to reassess its regional alliances and strategic priorities.

The most recent turning point came in 2023, when Armenia once again found itself at the centre of a geopolitical shift. The blockade of the Lachin Corridor, followed by Azerbaijan's renewed military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh, fundamentally altered the country's security landscape. This period of crisis ultimately led the Armenian government to take the unprecedented step of freezing its participation in the Russian-led CSTO, signalling a significant departure from its traditional reliance on Russian security guarantees. In February 2025, Armenia's parliament approved a bill to initiate the process of joining the European Union with holding a referendum on EU membership as the next step in this process.

Thus, three crucial turning points – 2013, 2017-2018 and 2023-2025 – in Armenian political developments have ushered in key inflection points in the EU-Armenian relations.

Turning to Ukraine, the country's democratic development and its relationship with the European Union have been shaped by two key turning points: 2013-2014 and 2022. In November 2013, the pro-Russian government of President Yanukovych refused to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, triggering a mass uprising known as the Maidan or the Revolution of Dignity. While this pro-European and anti-authoritarian movement led to snap presidential and parliamentary elections, subsequent democratic reforms and efforts to integrate with the EU and NATO were soon overshadowed by Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Following the restoration of a democratic government through elections and the signing of the Association Agreement in 2014, the EU expanded and diversified its support for Ukraine's reforms. Given the ongoing Russian hybrid aggression, this support has focused not only on deepening Ukraine's European integration and strengthening democratic institutions but also on enhancing the country's resilience.

In 2022, Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine, dramatically altering the geopolitical landscape and prompting the EU to swiftly reas-

sess its long-standing "integration-but-not-accession" policy. EU integration had long been viewed not only as a means of fostering economic and political development but also as a way to bolster Ukraine's ability to address security threats. In response, the Ukrainian government applied for EU membership just four days after the invasion began. Following four months of discussions and deliberations, the EU granted Ukraine candidate status in June 2022, formally paving the way for accession reforms, including those aimed at strengthening democracy.

Thus, the two key turning points – 2013-2014 and 2022 – have profoundly shaped Ukraine's democratic development and its evolving relationship with the EU.

5.2 Mapping key actors and analysing discourse on democracy support across historical turning points

A wide range of European actors shape the discourse on the EU's democracy support in Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine. All major EU institutions play a role, including the European Council, the Council of the EU, the European Parliament and the European Commission. The Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and the EU Delegations in these countries hold particularly crucial roles. Other institutional mechanisms, such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the Neighbourhood Investment Facility (NIF) and the European Peace Facility (EPF), also contribute to interactions with these states.

Key EU institutions closely monitor developments in Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine, issuing statements and shaping the discourse on democracy. High-ranking officials play an active role in this process, whether representing their institutions or voicing personal perspectives. Within the European Commission, the President, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the Commissioner for Enlargement are among the most influential figures commenting on democracy. Similarly, the Presidents of the European Council and the European Parliament, along with individual members of the European Parliament (MEPs), frequently engage in discussions on these issues.

Beyond institutional actors, the Eastern Partnership Implementation Summits and Meetings serve as important platforms for discursive engagement. European NGOs and think tanks also play a significant role in

analysing and assessing the democratic landscape in Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine. These non-governmental actors often bring a more diverse range of perspectives, critically evaluating both the state of democracy in Eastern Europe and the EU's policies and initiatives supporting democratic development.

To assess contestation among and within the above-mentioned actors, the chapter analyses the discursive practices using four methodological devices. *Setting*: The broader narrative framework that defines the stage (e.g., Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine described as "hybrid regimes" or "states in transition toward democracy"); *characters*: How different actors are portrayed – whether as heroes, villains or victims. For example, citizens of these countries may be framed as "heroes" defending democracy and "victims" of authoritarianism, while governmental institutions or foreign actors (e.g., Russia) may be depicted as villains; *plot*: The connections between characters and the policy setting, adding layers of interpretation to the narrative. For instance, events such as protests against the "foreign agents (Russian) law", Armenia's Velvet Revolution and Ukraine's Euromaidan may be portrayed as "uprisings". *Moral of the story*: The policy solutions proposed in response to the setting, characters and plot. This includes the EU's role and the instruments it employs at the discursive level (e.g., conditionality, sanctions), as well as an analysis of gaps, challenges or double standards in EU policies.

5.2.1 Georgia

As mentioned above in June 2022 Georgia, instead of candidate status, was offered only a European perspective, contingent upon fulfilling 12 specific conditions. Brussels defended this decision by highlighting that, despite Georgia's performance in implementing the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, its democratic progress and commitment to political transition remained significantly behind.

Analysing the discourse of state and non-state actors within European institutions regarding the assessment of democracy and the rationale behind this decision, there appears to be no significant contestation or divergence of views.

In 2022, the appointment of four Supreme Court justices by Georgia's Parliament ignited widespread criticism from international organisations, civil society and opposition lawmakers. The ruling Georgian Dream

party pushed through the nominations despite concerns over transparency, judicial reforms and the legitimacy of the selection process. Opposition members of parliament condemned the move as an attempt to solidify a so-called "judicial clan" and accused the government of deliberately stalling much-needed reforms to address judicial corruption. The EU delegation in Georgia voiced their disappointment, emphasising that the appointments violated commitments tied to judicial reforms and EU financial assistance. Civil society organisations similarly denounced the process as flawed and illegitimate, calling for comprehensive justice reforms before any further appointments. Against this backdrop, European Parliament President Roberta Metsola reaffirmed Georgia's place in the "European family" but underscored those reforms in the judiciary and rule of law remained crucial for the country's European path. Meanwhile, a Brussels-based think tank, CEPS, argued that Georgia's political regime has long contradicted the EU's core democratic values, particularly regarding institutional integrity and the rule of law. According to CEPS, the root of these issues lies in the concentration of political power in the hands of an unelected and unaccountable oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili, exemplifying a case of state capture (Emerson and Blockmans 2022).

This growing concern over Georgia's democratic trajectory was further reflected in the European Parliament's resolution of 9 June 2022, which condemned violations of media freedom in the country and urged Georgian authorities to uphold the highest democratic standards, including judicial independence, fair trials and fundamental freedoms. The resolution linked these concerns directly to Georgia's European aspirations, calling on its government to demonstrate genuine political commitment to reforms as a prerequisite for EU candidate status. While recognising the legitimacy of the Georgian people's European ambitions – evidenced by the country's formal application for EU membership in March 2022 – the resolution made clear that accession must be based on merit, requiring full compliance with democratic principles outlined in Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (European Parliament 2022d).

The European Commission assessed Georgia's application based on its ability to meet the Copenhagen (1993) and Madrid (1995) criteria, acknowledging progress in macroeconomic stability and the implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement. However, it highlighted ongoing challenges, including political polarisation, judicial independence, high-level corruption and threats to media freedom. Concerns also re-

mained over human rights protections, law enforcement accountability and the need for "de-oligarchisation" reforms. As a result, the Commission recommended that Georgia be granted only a European perspective rather than candidate status (European Commission 2022a). The Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) of the European Parliament emphasised that candidate status for Georgia remained within reach, but only once its government demonstrated concrete progress on the outlined priorities (European Parliament 2022a).

Throughout 2023, thus prior to the second historical turning point when in December the EU decided to grant Georgia with a candidate status, European actors maintained a critical stance toward Georgia's EU integration efforts, emphasising concerns over democracy, judicial independence, media freedom and political polarisation.

The European Commission's Analytical Report (1 February 2023) acknowledged some progress in judicial reforms but stressed persistent deficiencies in judicial independence, law enforcement accountability, public procurement and financial transparency. It called for comprehensive reforms to strengthen democratic institutions and the rule of law (European Commission 2023a). On 15 February 2023, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling on the Council to consider imposing sanctions on Bidzina Ivanishvili for his role in Georgia's deteriorating political environment (European Parliament 2023b).

In response to the Georgian Dream government's attempt to introduce a "foreign agents" law, the Renew Europe group in the European Parliament (14 March 2023) condemned the move as a threat to democracy. MEP Urmas Paet warned: "Georgia's draft foreign agent law would have been a step in the wrong direction. The people of Georgia want a European path but this law is a step towards Russia" (Goleanu 2023). MEP Petras Auštrevičius expressed solidarity with Georgia's civil society, praising its role in advancing democratic reforms (Goleanu 2023).

The criticism intensified on 27 April 2023, when MEP Thijs Reuten (S&D Netherlands) rightly accused the Georgian government of disregarding the country's pro-European aspirations, stating: "Georgian Dream prefers cosying up with Viktor Orban and other anti-rights- or Putin friends, over working on EU candidate status" (Reuten 2023). During the EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee meeting (8 June 2023), MEP Marina Kaljurand described Georgia's progress on the EU's 12 priorities as "incomplete, patchy and often superficial" (European Parliament

2023a). Days later, on 15 June 2023, EU Ambassador Pawel Herczynski stressed the importance of de-oligarchisation, urging Georgia to address the influence of vested interests in politics (Civil Georgia 2023). On 22 June 2023, EU Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi acknowledged that Georgia had completed three of the 12 priorities outlined by the EU but emphasised that significant reforms were still necessary (European Commission 2023d).

The European Commission's human rights report reiterated concerns over judicial independence, political polarisation and threats to media freedom, noting that discrimination against minorities and gender-based violence remained critical issues (EEAS 2024). The European Commission's staff report further criticised amendments to the Election Code adopted in June 2023, arguing they contradicted OSCE/ODIHR recommendations and weakened electoral integrity by centralising power over the Central Election Commission (CEC) in the ruling party's hands. With parliamentary elections approaching in 2024, concerns over electoral transparency and fairness remain high (European Commission 2023b).

Overall, European actors consistently pressed Georgia to uphold democratic principles, urging reforms in judicial independence, electoral integrity, media freedom and anti-corruption measures. While the EU reaffirmed its support for Georgia's European aspirations, progress toward candidate status remained conditional on addressing these fundamental challenges.

However, in December 2023, despite falling short of the EU's conditions for candidate status, Tbilisi was unexpectedly granted the designation triggering a turning point in Georgia and its relations with the EU. This decision strengthened the ruling Georgian Dream party while weakening efforts for genuine democratic reform. Instead of driving progress, the EU's inability to enforce conditionality had the opposite effect. The Georgian government took the candidate status as an endorsement of its approach, doubling down on authoritarian measures. It revived the contentious 'foreign agents' law (referred to as the "Russian law") and introduced anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, echoing repressive policies in Russia. These actions sparked widespread protests across Georgia.

In response, a unified stance emerged within the European Union against Georgia's proposed "Transparency of Foreign Influence" law. EU Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Peter Stano strongly criticised the law, warning it could hinder Georgia's EU aspirations by undermining civil

society, media freedom and democratic principles. He emphasised that the law would distance Georgia from its European integration goals (European Commission 2024c).

The European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with the South Caucasus similarly expressed concern, urging the Georgian government to withdraw the draft law and engage with civil society to uphold democratic values and human rights (European Parliament 2024a). MEPs echoed this sentiment in a joint resolution, calling for the immediate withdrawal of the law and stressing its potential to derail Georgia's EU membership ambitions (European Parliament 2024b).

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen also voiced concern, urging the Georgian government to heed public protests and implement necessary reforms for EU integration (European Commission 2024d). High Representative Josep Borrell, alongside other EU officials, warned that such developments, including the rising violence and disinformation, were pushing Georgia further away from EU integration (HR/VP 2024c). In addition, the Venice Commission criticised amendments to Georgia's electoral code, citing the lack of consensus-building and transparency, and urging reforms to ensure impartiality and public trust in election processes (Venice Commission 2024). To align its criticism with policy actions, the EU has frozen 30 million euros in support for Georgia from the European Peace Facility, signalling a firm stance on the importance of democratic reforms.

Georgia's 2024 parliamentary elections, another historical turning point for the country, were marked by serious irregularities, including voter pressure, institutional interference and legislative concerns affecting fundamental freedoms. The OSCE/ODIHR report reiterated its findings, stating that election conditions 'compromised the ability of some voters to cast their vote without fear of retribution' and that post-election complaints were not sufficiently considered, limiting legal remedies (OSCE 2024a, 2024b, European Commission and HR/VP 2024, European Parliament 2024c). The EU emphasised the need for urgent electoral and judicial reforms, with High Representative Josep Borrell warning that without decisive changes, Georgia's European integration prospects would be at risk (HR/VP 2024a).

The European Parliament called for new elections under international supervision and urged sanctions against Georgian leadership, stating that the government's actions were "incompatible with Euro-Atlantic inte-

gration" (European Parliament 2024d) The EU stressed repealing restrictive laws like the "Transparency of Foreign Influence" act, tackling disinformation and improving institutional independence. The forcible suppression of protests and arrests further heightened concerns, with the EU calling on Georgia to prioritise rule of law, institutional reforms and inclusivity to restore its European trajectory (European Commission 2024a).

Following the 2024 parliamentary elections, the ruling party unilaterally announced the suspension of Georgia's EU integration process – a move that directly violated Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution, which obligates all governments to advance the country's Euro-Atlantic path. This unconstitutional decision ignited an unprecedented wave of nationwide protests, bringing together citizens across generations and regions under a unified demand: new elections. For over 100 days, protests have persisted, met with mass arrests of human rights activists and the adoption of repressive legislation as the government seeks to suppress dissent.

EU Foreign Policy Chief Kaja Kallas condemned the crackdown on protesters, opposition figures and journalists, demanding the release of detainees and thorough investigations into allegations of torture and human rights abuses. The EU has urged the Georgian government to de-escalate tensions, safeguard fundamental rights and reaffirm its commitment to European integration (HR/VP 2024b). Meanwhile, the Council reiterated its support for Georgia's EU path, strongly condemning violence against peaceful demonstrators, media and politicians while calling for urgent democratic reforms and alignment with EU principles (Council of the EU 2024). The EU has suspended visa-free travel for Georgian diplomats, officials and their families holding diplomatic and official passports. They will now be required to obtain a visa for short stays of up to 90 days within any 180-day period in the Schengen Area (Council of the EU 2025).

Similarly to other European institutions, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) strongly condemned Georgia's democratic backsliding, highlighting electoral irregularities, human rights abuses and the erosion of fundamental freedoms. The Assembly expressed concerns over the legitimacy of the October 2024 parliamentary elections, citing voter intimidation, political interference and a lack of fair electoral conditions. It also criticised the government's suspension of Georgia's EU accession process, which triggered mass protests and a deep political crisis. PACE denounced police brutality against demonstrators, the misuse of the judiciary to suppress opposition and civil society, and

the shrinking space for democratic engagement. It urged Georgian authorities to commit to European democratic standards, hold new internationally monitored elections and release political prisoners. The Assembly called for immediate reforms, including repealing the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence and ensuring accountability for human rights violations. As a response, PACE temporarily suspended several rights of Georgia's parliamentary delegation, restricting their participation in key committees and election observation missions. However, it maintained dialogue with Georgian civil society and opposition groups and left open the possibility of reconsidering the delegation's status in April 2025 if significant democratic progress is made (PACE 2024).

The European think tank's analysis of Georgia's parliamentary elections and its deepening democratic backsliding aligns closely with the EU's position on the unfolding crisis. It calls on Brussels to take decisive action to prevent Georgian Dream from staging a crackdown reminiscent of Belarusian leader Aleksandr Lukashenko's (Atasuntsev 2025, de Waal 2024), including imposing targeted sanctions – such as asset freezes on the ruling party's leader (Ax and Victor 2025) – and providing sustained support to local civil society groups and independent media (Akhvlediani 2024).

5.2.2 Armenia

The Armenian U-turn in 2013 – its abrupt refusal to sign the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area treaty – followed by its announcement to join the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015, marked a pivotal moment in EU-Armenia relations. This move initiated a "period of silence" between Armenian authorities and EU institutions, with both sides recalibrating their engagement.

While the European Council adopted a reserved and forward-looking tone, refraining from open criticism, the European Parliament took a more frank stance. The Council's response, as reflected in the Eastern Partnership Summit Joint Declaration of 2013, reaffirmed the EU's commitment to cooperation and emphasised the principle of sovereign choice for each partner:

> The EU and Armenia have today reconfirmed their commitment to further develop and strengthen their cooperation [...] the Summit participants reaffirm the sovereign right of each partner freely to

> choose the level of ambition and the goals to which it aspires in its relations with the European Union. (Armenia et al. 2013)

This language downplayed the rupture and emphasised continuity, even pointing to "enhanced cooperation" in areas such as justice, freedom and security across all Eastern Partnership countries.

By contrast, the European Parliament expressed clear frustration with Armenia's decision, framing it as undemocratic and imposed under Russian pressure. In a resolution passed shortly after the U-turn, the Parliament underlined the need for respect for civic protest and civil liberties, stating:

> The Armenian authorities decided instead to join the Customs Union, following Russian pressure; [the Parliament] reminds the Armenian authorities that the protests and demonstrations against this decision are an expression of the free will of the country's citizens [...] persecution and detentions are violations of the rights of assembly and expression and [...] run counter to recent rhetoric of commitment to shared values with the EU (European Parliament 2013).

Prior to this reversal, there had already been acknowledgments – both explicit and implicit – of external pressure from Russia. Yet, while MEPs like Elmar Brok and Jacek Saryusz-Wolski publicly criticised Moscow's influence and lamented Armenia's turn away from Europe, such concerns were largely absent from official declarations. Brok stated pointedly: "Europe has not lost Armenia. Armenia has lost the European perspective", while Saryusz-Wolski, though more diplomatic, regretted the wasted effort on both sides (Chilingarian 2013).

A Parliament resolution from December that year expressed regret that Armenia opted to join the Customs Union, following Russian pressure, and reminded Armenian authorities to respect their citizens' right to protest (European Parliament 2013).

Surprisingly, these narratives of pressure and disappointment were not reflected in the Joint Declaration of the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit in 2013. Armenia's decision to withdraw from the Association Agreement (AA) negotiations is not mentioned, nor is Russia's role – likely overshadowed by the dramatic parallel withdrawal by Ukraine. This erasure of geopolitical tensions from the formal summit language underscores the EU's cautious balancing act in maintaining engagement with Eastern partners without openly antagonising Russia (Armenia et al. 2013).

In the aftermath, although Armenia had decisively pivoted towards Moscow under President Sargsyan, the EU refrained from closing the door. Rather than fundamentally rethinking its discursive approach to Armenia or learning from the setback, EU institutions – especially the Commission – chose to reframe the episode as a sovereign choice, avoiding a more critical or strategic reassessment. The potential democratic implications of Armenia's move received limited attention in official EU documents. This critical change in Armenia's foreign policy did not produce a definitive learning effect for the EU. Rather than distinctly modify its discourses related to Armenia, the EU reacted to Armenia's decision to back out of the AA signature by remaining open to new future policies.

In early 2014, the European Parliament expressed optimism that Armenia, despite abandoning the AA process, could make democratic progress with EU support. Referring to the 2013 allocations under the Eastern Partnership Integration and Cooperation (EaPIC) programme, it placed Armenia alongside Georgia and Moldova as countries capable of advancing reforms in democracy and human rights (European Parliament 2014c).

At the civil society level, the NGO European Friends of Armenia (EuFoA) emerged as a key actor. Based in both Brussels and Yerevan, EuFoA positioned itself as a bridge-builder between Armenian and EU political and civil actors. Prior to Armenia's withdrawal, the organisation framed democratic ambitions as central to EU-Armenia negotiations. After the U-turn, however, its tone became more cautious. Rather than issuing direct critiques, EuFoA curated and redistributed statements of disappointment from other European actors (e.g., Radio Free Europe), avoiding public comment on the shift itself. Notably, the pivotal 2013 Vilnius Summit was absent from the organisation's publications. Instead, EuFoA highlighted the continuation of visa liberalisation talks – presenting this as a sign of ongoing, if limited, cooperation.

In sum, Armenia's abrupt foreign policy shift prompted a fragmented and somewhat muted EU response. While Parliamentarians voiced concern and frustration, official EU discourse remained anchored in principles of sovereignty and engagement. The episode revealed gaps in EU coherence, limited institutional learning and a reluctance to challenge geopolitical realities head-on. The discursive framing downplayed both the democratic backsliding implied by the move and the geopolitical leverage exerted by Russia – raising broader questions about the EU's capacity for critical (un)learning in its democracy support practices.

Two years after Armenia's withdrawal from the Association Agreement, negotiations resumed between Yerevan and Brussels, culminating in the 2017 signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Although the agreement included references to democratic reforms, it carefully avoided evaluative judgments, portraying Armenia as a democracy without addressing its authoritarian characteristics at the time. CEPA only entered into provisional application after the Velvet Revolution in June 2018, suggesting that political change in Armenia – rather than shifts in EU policy – was the decisive factor for its activation.

The rhetoric surrounding CEPA negotiations echoed the EU's earlier tone. High Representative Federica Mogherini, at a Cooperation Council meeting in May 2017, described the agreement as merely the "next step" in the bilateral relationship, reaffirming the EU's willingness to "expand and deepen cooperation with Armenia" (European Union and Armenia 2017). The European Parliament remained largely silent on the negotiations until after the signing, but welcomed the agreement in 2018. Together with EuroNest, it expressed support for ensuring that ordinary Armenians would not be affected by external sanctions (European Parliament 2018, EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly 2018a, 2018b).

During the unfolding of the Velvet Revolution, EU institutions responded with caution. Likely concerned about triggering escalation or being perceived as interfering, their reactions were measured. On 22 April 2018, after Nikol Pashinyan and nearly 200 protesters were arrested, a spokesperson for Mogherini issued a statement affirming the right to peaceful assembly and urging Armenian authorities to respect their international obligations, particularly under the European Convention on Human Rights. The EU called for the immediate release of those detained and stressed the need for restraint, responsibility and inclusive dialogue (EEAS 2018c).

When Pashinyan was released the next day and Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan resigned, the EU delegation to Armenia 'took note' of the resignation and praised the peaceful nature of the political transition. It urged a national dialogue that included all political stakeholders (EEAS 2018b). Upon Pashinyan's election as Prime Minister on 8 May, Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn issued a joint statement affirming that the process had adhered to constitutional norms and emphasising their readiness to work with the new government – again framing the moment as an opportunity for inclusive dialogue.

In June 2018, the European Parliament sent a delegation of nine MEPs, led by Foreign Affairs Committee Chair David McAllister, to Armenia. McAllister lauded the peaceful nature of the protests and the high degree of civic engagement, describing the moment as pivotal for strengthening democracy, fighting corruption and deepening EU-Armenia ties. He stressed that both citizens and leaders had demonstrated commitment to reform and that the EU would support this process "every step of the way" (EEAS 2018a).

In July, European Council President Donald Tusk and Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker each met with Pashinyan during a NATO summit. Tusk remarked, "What happened in Armenia was extraordinary and, I must say, very European" (PanArmenian 2018), while Juncker emphasised the inspiring nature of Armenia's peaceful transition and reiterated EU readiness to support its reform agenda (Armenia Government 2018).

By November 2018, the European Commission had reviewed the second year of the EU's Single Support Framework for Armenia (2017-2020), interpreting the Velvet Revolution as a popular call for stronger democratic governance. The Commission recognised the transitional government's programme of organising early elections and laying the groundwork for reform in transparency, accountability and citizen participation. The report also acknowledged the challenges of consolidating democratic gains and noted that public consultations were underway across various sectors, with an emphasis on regional engagement and increased civic involvement, especially among women and youth.

Despite the stark contrast between Armenia's 2013 pivot toward the Eurasian Economic Union and the 2018 Velvet Revolution, the EU's discursive approach remained largely consistent. While the contexts differed significantly, both events were framed within a sovereignty-centred narrative. The EU did not substantially revise its rhetoric or strategic approach in response to Armenia's domestic transformations. Pashinyan's arrest and the repression of protests in April 2018 were met with concern, but framed as issues of legal proportionality and human rights, rather than systemic critique. Once the protests gave way to elections, EU discourse quickly shifted to one of optimism and partnership.

As in 2013, the EU's response remained reactive and conditional: engagement was to proceed only upon Armenia's initiative. The EU remained eager to deepen cooperation, but its actions and rhetoric reflected an enduring reluctance to exert normative pressure or take a proactive

stance. The Revolution was viewed as a legitimate expression of Armenian sovereignty, and cooperation was presented not as an incentive for reform but as a response to it – continuing the pattern of supporting rather than shaping democratic transformations.

The 2020 Second Karabakh War marked a turning point in modern Armenian history. Armenia's defeat by Azerbaijan and the subsequent fallout reshaped the country's political landscape and even led to constitutional changes. Yet, the European Union's stance toward Armenia did not immediately reflect this seismic shift. A meaningful change in EU narratives only began to emerge once Brussels reassessed Russia's role in the region.

In the initial phase of the conflict, beginning in October 2020 with Azerbaijan's offensive in the separatist region of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), EU institutions were hesitant to assume an active role in mediation. While European Council President Charles Michel underscored the normative basis of EU-Armenia relations, security concerns dominated the discourse. At the time, Russia was still viewed as the principal guarantor of Armenian security. Michel stated:

> Finally, the last item I would like to mention is Nagorno-Karabakh. We were debriefed by the High Representative. Several Member States have sent us their analyses, including the French President. I have personally had the opportunity to speak to President Aliyev and to the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, this week. Of course, we call for an immediate cessation of hostilities. We stand ready, alongside all stakeholders, to endeavour to encourage a resumption of political dialogue in the framework of the Minsk Group within the OSCE, as we believe this is the only option to stem the escalation of violence in the hostilities. We consider it essential to ensure stability and security. We shall continue to be highly active in this matter, and we naturally intend to do our best to guarantee the protection of people in the region as far as we can. (European Council 2020).

A similar position was expressed by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who reiterated the need for urgent de-escalation and warned against any military solution or external interference (European Commission 2020). When a humanitarian ceasefire was agreed on 10 October 2020, the EU issued a cautious statement welcoming the development but expressing deep concern over ongoing violations and civilian casualties

(HR/VP 2020). The emphasis remained on immediate humanitarian issues, with no attempt to frame the conflict in geopolitical or normative terms. The EU, in this phase, presented a united front but refrained from positioning itself as a key mediator or questioning the prevailing security order.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, EU discourse remained largely unchanged. In January 2021, the European Parliament passed a resolution reiterating the need for a cessation of hostilities and for humanitarian assistance (European Parliament 2021a). A second resolution called for the release of prisoners of war (European Parliament 2021b) but did not broaden the scope to link human rights or security issues to Armenia's domestic political trajectory. Even in meetings such as that between Michel and Pashinyan, references to "security, stability and prosperity" and to "human values and democracy" appeared only in general closing remarks, detached from a more integrated narrative (Armenia Government 2021).

By March 2022, however, a shift in parliamentary discourse began to take shape. A resolution condemning the destruction of Armenian cultural heritage sites in Nagorno-Karabakh explicitly linked the protection of such heritage to the promotion of lasting peace and democracy (European Parliament 2022c). In its 2022 review of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the European Parliament expanded on this theme, warning that the presence of Russian 'peacekeepers' and the consequences of the 2020 hostilities should not be allowed to derail Armenia's political development or reform agenda. This marked the first significant discursive departure from earlier frameworks, acknowledging the precariousness of Armenia's democratic trajectory and the need to address it in strategic terms. Still, other EU institutions remained cautious and slower to follow suit.

A more definitive narrative shift took place in 2023, as events on the ground triggered what could be described as a *learning effect* within EU institutions. Azerbaijan's blockade of the Lachin Corridor and the forced displacement of Karabakh Armenians catalysed a broader reassessment of regional dynamics. In response, the EU established the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in February 2023, a follow-up to the EU Monitoring Capacity in Armenia (EUMCAP) initiated the previous autumn (European Council 2022a). While EUMA operated only with Yerevan's approval and was therefore confined to Armenian territory, its very

establishment signalled a growing EU willingness to engage more substantively in regional security.

Importantly, these developments were accompanied by a significant discursive transformation. Russia's failure to uphold its obligations under the CSTO, combined with its inaction during Azerbaijan's escalation in Karabakh, weakened its perceived credibility as a regional security provider. EU institutions began to explicitly reference this shift. The European Parliament characterised the threats facing Armenia as "hybrid attacks against [its] constitutional order and democratic institutions" (European Parliament 2023c), moving away from a purely humanitarian or diplomatic framework. Commissioner Thierry Breton drew a direct line between geopolitical tensions in the South Caucasus and Russia's broader war of aggression against Ukraine, reframing the conflict as part of a wider confrontation between autocracy and democracy. President Michel went as far as to say that Russia had "betrayed" the Armenian people (Lory and Jones 2023).

This narrative culminated in a high-level meeting in 2023 between Prime Minister Pashinyan and EU leaders – President von der Leyen, High Representative Josep Borrell – joined by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and USAID Administrator Samantha Power. The gathering served to "reaffirm support for Armenia's sovereignty, democracy, territorial integrity, and socio-economic resilience" (European Commission 2024b). Von der Leyen emphasised that the EU and Armenia were increasingly aligned in values and interests. She commended Armenia's democratic reforms and its efforts to enforce EU sanctions against Russia, particularly by preventing the transfer of dual-use technologies to the Russian military.

This moment marked a fundamental discursive shift. Armenia's security was no longer viewed in isolation from its democratic development. The EU began to conceptualise the safeguarding of Armenia's territorial integrity as directly tied to the sustainability of its democratic institutions. This reframing suggests that, by 2023, the EU had moved beyond its earlier reactive posture, embracing a more integrated strategic view of Armenia's role in the regional and normative order.

5.2.3 Ukraine

The dominant narratives and discourses within the EU regarding Ukraine before November 2013, and the onset of mass protests in Kyiv, largely framed the country as a weak or developing democracy. Ukraine was

portrayed as a post-Soviet state plagued by corruption, a shadow economy, oligarch-controlled media and fragile institutions. While some recognition was given to its vibrant civil society and competitive electoral system, Ukraine was not widely regarded as a fully democratic country. Additionally, Russian-backed narratives about an East-West divide and alleged discrimination against Russian-speaking populations gained traction in Western media and academic circles after 2005, further shaping external perceptions of Ukraine's political landscape.

By 2013, despite the EU's progress toward signing an Association Agreement (AA) with Ukraine, this agreement was primarily seen as an economic arrangement rather than a step toward deeper political integration. From the EU's perspective, the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the AA represented the furthest extent of engagement it was willing to offer Ukraine. While pro-democracy actors and communities of practice in Ukraine continued to advocate for eventual EU membership, such a prospect remained off the table in Brussels. This disconnect between Ukrainian aspirations and EU policy would soon become a critical point of contention, as events unfolded on the ground.

The protests that erupted in November 2013 initially centred on students and activists opposing President Yanukovych's decision to reject the AA. However, following the brutal police crackdown on protesters by the Berkut special police unit on November 30, 2013, the movement escalated into a broader struggle for fundamental democratic rights, including freedom of speech and assembly. This shift in focus marked a transformation in both the framing and naming of the movement: what began as 'Euromaidan' – emphasising European integration – evolved into 'Maidan' and, ultimately, the 'Revolution of Dignity', underscoring the fight for human rights and resistance to Yanukovych's autocratic rule. While these terms reflected the protesters' self-identification, they were quickly absorbed into wider discourses, both supportive and contesting. The label 'Revolution of Dignity' gained increasing prominence as the movement intensified, culminating in the dramatic events of 18-20 February 2014.

During the Maidan events and their aftermath, key EU officials and institutions, while striving to maintain neutrality and act as mediators between authorities and protesters, ultimately aligned themselves with the Maidan participants and their cause. The EU placed responsibility for the "use of excessive force" (European Council 2014) squarely on the Ukrainian authorities, framing the protests as a democratic movement crucial

for Europe. EU leaders openly expressed support for the demonstrators, highlighting the broader significance of their struggle. Commissioner for Enlargement Štefan Füle underscored the enduring importance of democracy, stating that "Maidan reminded us all that the value of democracy can never be underestimated – you have to take care of it and, sometimes, you have to take strong stance and defend it" (European Commission 2014b). Similarly, Commission President José Manuel Barroso emphasised that "the Ukrainian people demonstrated why Europe is important, what Europe means and what Europe stands for […] freedom, democracy and rule of law […] the values which are at the core of the European Union" (European Commission 2014a). The European Parliament and several members of the European Parliament (MEPs) echoed this sentiment, praising "the democratic spirit and resilience of the Ukrainian people after two months of courageous protests" (European Parliament 2014b, Euractiv 2014) and reaffirming support for Ukraine's European perspective (European Parliament 2014a).

Throughout this period, EU representatives assumed two primary roles in the dominant discourse: first, as staunch supporters of democratic 'European' values, reinforcing the idea that Maidan was not just a national uprising but part of a broader European struggle for democracy; and second, as mediators attempting to broker a resolution between the conflicting parties. This dual positioning underscored the EU's engagement in Ukraine's transformation while also reflecting the limitations of its direct influence in shaping events on the ground.

The violent escalation on 20 February 2014, when Berkut forces opened fire on protesters, marked a turning point. In an effort to defuse the crisis, the EU facilitated an agreement between the opposition and President Yanukovych on 21 February 2014. However, the deal was rendered void when Yanukovych fled to Russia, prompting Ukraine's Parliament to call for a presidential election in May 2014. Discursively, this sequence of events was framed as a victory for the protesters, albeit one achieved at a tremendous human cost after three months of continuous demonstrations and significant loss of life.

A critical juncture in the Maidan movement was its framing as a democratic protest grounded in European values. This perception shaped the initial phase of reflection within the EU, leading to the conclusion that Europe needed to adopt a more active role in supporting democracy in Ukraine. The EU's response centred on leveraging the mechanisms of the

Association Agreement (AA) and pursuing deeper integration. However, this consensus was not without contestation. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Sadecki 2014) and certain far-right and far-left politicians – many of them Eurosceptics – challenged the dominant narrative of Maidan.

Criticism emerged on three levels. First, some Eurosceptic parties and politicians outright rejected the notion that Maidan was a democratic uprising, instead portraying it as a 'coup d'état' allegedly orchestrated by the US or the EU (Petsinis 2015). Second, while some EU member states supported democracy promotion in Ukraine in principle, they objected to specific instruments the EU used to assist Kyiv, such as economic sanctions on Russia or military aid to Ukraine. Third, certain political forces within the EU contested the very classification of Ukraine as a democratic state. They pointed to legislative issues, minority rights, language policies, media freedom, corruption, judicial weaknesses and Ukraine's military actions against 'separatists' in Donetsk and Luhansk (Syriza 2014). For instance, Orbán argued that "Ukraine can be neither stable, nor democratic if it does not give its minorities, including Hungarians, their due" and pushed for autonomy for regions with sizable Hungarian populations (Reuters 2014). Some far-right and far-left politicians went even further, denouncing Ukraine's anti-terrorist operations in Donbas as anti-democratic and targeting the 'people of Donbas'.

This phase of discourse evolved significantly in response to Russian aggression. The next chapter in the EU's framing of events was heavily shaped by Russian propaganda, which promoted narratives of Ukraine's 'East/West divide', a 'pro-Russian Crimea' and the claim that the 'people of South-East Ukraine and/or Donbas' had freely chosen to align with Russia. While Russia had previously been seen as merely supporting Yanukovych and certain factions within Ukraine, by February 2014, it was increasingly recognised as the primary perpetrator threatening Ukraine's sovereignty. However, EU discourses initially lagged in fully acknowledging Russia's direct military role. In the early months of the crisis, narratives still included references to 'separatists', 'pro-Russian activists' and 'referendums', inadvertently echoing Russia's strategic messaging of 'we are not there' and 'the people of Crimea/South/Donbas have made their choice'.

Despite this initial hesitancy, the European Parliament gradually adopted stronger language, with resolutions explicitly referring to "pro-Russian separatists, led in most cases by Russian special forces" (Eu-

ropean Parliament 2014d). This shift marked a crucial turning point in EU rhetoric, as the bloc moved from a more cautious, mediated framing of the conflict to a more assertive acknowledgment of Russia's aggressive actions and its role in destabilising Ukraine.

The EU condemned Russia's annexation and occupation of Crimea, responding with its first set of sanctions. However, these measures were met with resistance from some EU member states. Governments in Hungary (BBC 2014), Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Luhn 2014), along with several European far-right parties (Dodman 2014), questioned the effectiveness and necessity of imposing sanctions, arguing that they could harm economic ties with Russia. Despite this internal contestation, the EU proceeded with its strategic engagement with Ukraine by signing the Association Agreement, signalling political and economic support for the country.

In Ukraine, communities of practice largely welcomed the EU's political backing, its support for civil society and the reform initiatives launched under the AA framework. However, there was significant criticism from Ukrainian actors regarding the EU's perceived lack of robust measures against Russia's hybrid aggression. Many felt that the EU and its member states were not exerting enough pressure on Russia or providing Ukraine with the necessary means to defend itself. This sentiment shifted slightly in mid-2014 after the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 and the escalation of warfare in Donbas in July-August, when Russian regular troops were confirmed to be operating in occupied territories. These events led to a firmer display of political support and greater EU unity in backing Ukraine.

By the summer of 2014, the EU and its institutions were gradually realising that democracy support in Ukraine was not solely about fostering internal reforms – it was about defending Ukraine as a democracy against Russia and its proxies. This shift in understanding influenced both rhetorical and material support for Ukraine's state-building efforts. Key reforms gained momentum, including decentralisation, the restructuring of state monopolies and companies (such as Naftogaz, Ukrzaliznytsia and Ukrposhta), anti-corruption initiatives (establishment of independent agencies, procurement and tender procedure reforms) and the early stages of judicial reform. A significant aspect of this reform wave was the emphasis on digitalisation as a tool for combating corruption and enhancing citizen engagement.

Within EU narratives surrounding Ukraine's European integration – encompassing the AA, visa-free travel and broader political alignment – corruption was consistently framed as the primary obstacle. Corrupt politicians, civil servants, state institutions and oligarch-controlled media were identified as major threats to Ukraine's democratic future and reform progress. This discourse not only justified EU involvement in supporting governance reforms but also reinforced the idea that Ukraine's struggle was as much about overcoming internal challenges as it was about resisting external aggression.

Thus, back to 2014 and in the aftermaths, the EU officials maintained a unified and synchronised narrative, demonstrating the EU's capacity for institutional learning and adaptation in response to geopolitical shifts. This alignment in discourse extended beyond the EU itself. International intergovernmental organisations echoed the EU's official stance, prioritising support for Ukraine's democratic development, good governance and territorial integrity (IMF 2014:23). While these organisations did not specifically emphasise the Maidan movement, they reinforced the broader framework of democracy support in Ukraine.

Non-governmental organisations, both within the EU and internationally, displayed more variation in their positions depending on political alignment and institutional affiliation. For instance, analysts at Carnegie Europe largely agreed that Maidan was a positive turning point but diverged on policy recommendations. Some advocated for increased pressure on Ukrainian political elites to drive reforms (Sasse 2014), others emphasised direct support for civil society (Dempsey 2014), while another faction pushed for the EU to adopt a more assertive geopolitical role.

Despite these nuances, significant contestation regarding the EU's democracy support in Ukraine remained limited. Dissenting voices – whether questioning Ukraine's democratic trajectory or the EU's approach – were largely marginal or partisan. Rather than undermining the dominant narrative, these critiques served to highlight the overall consolidation of EU discourse, reinforcing the perception that democracy support in Ukraine was not just a policy choice but a strategic and normative imperative.

The 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked another historical turning point, triggering a period of reflection that – despite its brevity – led to profound shifts in EU-Ukraine relations, EU foreign and security policies, and the EU's approach to democracy support. What makes this transformation particularly striking is its unprecedented unity; the EU's response has been more cohesive than ever before.

Before 24 February 2022, Ukraine's EU membership was not a serious prospect in political discussions. However, almost immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion, EU rhetoric shifted dramatically. Ukraine's candidacy was swiftly endorsed – not only as an act of solidarity and support but also as a powerful political and symbolic statement of immense normative significance. By June 2022, this shift was formalised with the granting of candidate status, marking a historic transformation in EU-Ukraine relations.

This moment also saw an important fusion of narratives: supporting democracy in Ukraine became inseparable from supporting Ukraine as a democracy. The discourse evolved to frame Ukraine's struggle as a fight for democratic, European and Western values – especially in the face of aggression by an authoritarian regime openly hostile to democratic principles. Additionally, concerns emerged that Russia's ambitions extended beyond Ukraine, reinforcing the perception that its war was not just against one country but against democracy itself, the West, and Europe as a whole.

Unlike previous moments of reassessment, which were often shaped by discursive contestations among various communities of practice or external actors debating democracy support, this period of reflection was primarily driven by the sheer force of unfolding events. The invasion itself acted as a catalyst, prompting a rapid recalibration of rhetoric, policy and action.

While some contestation has remained within the discourse on democracy support in Ukraine, as well as on Ukraine's democratic credentials, such challenges were marginal. In most cases, they originate from actors who question not just Ukraine's democracy but the very principles of EU democracy support or even democracy itself. This pattern closely mirrors the dynamics of 2014, when the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas prompted moments of epiphany and reassessment within the EU. Then, as now, the crisis forced the EU to re-evaluate its approach, reinforcing the perception that democracy support is not merely a policy choice but an existential imperative in the face of authoritarian aggression.

The European Council, the European Parliament, the European Commission and the High Representative maintained a unified and resolute stance in their rhetoric following Russia's full-scale invasion. Their statements framed the invasion as not only an attack on Ukraine but also a direct assault on European stability and the international order. They placed full responsibility on Russia, vowing accountability and emphasis-

ing Ukraine's sovereign right to determine its own future. The urgency of their messages underscored the unprecedented nature of the aggression:

> It is President Putin, who is bringing war back to Europe. In these dark hours, the European Union and its people stand by Ukraine and its people. We are facing an unprecedented act of aggression by the Russian leadership against a sovereign, independent country. Russia's target is not only Donbass, the target is not only Ukraine, the target is the stability in Europe and the whole of the international peace order. And we will hold President Putin accountable for that. (European Commission 2022b)

The European Council reinforced this message by declaring:

> By its illegal military actions, Russia is grossly violating international law and the principles of the UN Charter and undermining European and global security and stability. The European Council underlines that this includes the right of Ukraine to choose its own destiny. Russia bears full responsibility for this act of aggression and all the destruction and loss of life it will cause. It will be held accountable for its actions. (European Council 2022b)

The European Parliament also made a clear commitment to supporting Ukraine:

> Calls for the EU and its Member States to continue providing the strongest possible economic and financial support to Ukraine [...] including in defence- and security-related areas, to activate any EU budget instruments available and to develop a long-term strategy to support Ukraine's efforts in strengthening the resilience of its democratic institutions and economy. (European Parliament 2022b)

The High Representative further stressed, "These are among the darkest hours for Europe since World War II. A major nuclear power has attacked a neighbouring country and is threatening reprisals on any other state that may come to its rescue" (HR/VP 2022).

This rhetoric was reinforced by international organisations, particularly NATO, as well as the majority of EU member states, civil society organisations, political parties, experts and activists. Their framing emphasised that Ukraine was not only defending its sovereignty but also fighting for shared European values:

> [T]his leaves the Ukrainian people fighting with their lives in the streets, cities and villages not only for their country, but also our common struggle to defend the European values of democracy, fundamental freedoms and civilized international relations against a common enemy. They deserve from the EU every form of support that it is capable of giving. (Emerson et al. 2022:1).

At its Versailles summit, the EU declared that "Ukraine belongs to the European family", while European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen assured President Zelensky that "Ukraine's European path has now begun" (Emerson et al. 2022:1). These statements signalled a historic shift in EU-Ukraine relations and reinforced the convergence of narratives that framed support for Ukraine as synonymous with the defence of democracy.

Conclusions

Starting with Georgia, as we see, the narrative across historical turning points unfolds within the broader context of Georgia's European integration efforts and the EU's conditionality-based approach to democracy support. It focuses on key political events between 2022 and 2024, particularly the EU's decision to grant Georgia candidate status despite democratic backsliding. The political landscape is marked by judicial reforms, media freedom concerns and increasing government authoritarianism, culminating in the suspension of Georgia's EU integration process.

At the heart of the story are its key characters. On one side, Georgian civil society and opposition figures emerge as defenders of democracy, resisting authoritarian policies and advocating for European values (thus heroes). The European Union and its institutions, including the European Commission and the European Parliament, position themselves as guardians of democratic principles, using diplomatic pressure and policy measures to push for reforms. In contrast, the ruling Georgian Dream party, along with its leader Bidzina Ivanishvili (villains), stands accused of consolidating power, weakening democratic institutions and suppressing opposition voices. The victims of this power struggle include Georgian citizens – particularly protesters, opposition figures, journalists and human rights activists – who face repression and persecution. Democratic institutions, including the judiciary, media and electoral processes, also suffer under political interference and authoritarian tactics.

The plot unfolds with increasing tension. Initially, Georgia's exclusion from candidate status in 2022 serves as a warning from the EU, a call for reform that is met with resistance from the ruling party. As the European Commission continues to outline necessary reforms, the government refuses to comply, and instead, European warnings are met with further democratic backsliding. Then comes the unexpected twist – December 2023, when the EU, despite all its previous concerns, grants Georgia candidate status. Rather than encouraging reforms, this decision emboldens the government, which perceives it as an endorsement of its approach rather than a call for change. Instead of progressing toward democracy, the ruling party doubles down, reviving restrictive laws and tightening its grip on power. By 2024, the situation reaches a breaking point. The parliamentary elections, marred by irregularities, trigger even larger protests, with citizens demanding new elections and a return to a pro-European course. The government, however, takes a dramatic step in the opposite direction – it unilaterally announces the suspension of Georgia's EU integration process, violating its own constitution. This sparks an even greater wave of resistance, with protests lasting over 100 days, escalating tensions between the government and the people.

The moral of the story is a cautionary one. Georgia's trajectory illustrates the unintended consequences of the EU's failure to enforce strict conditionality in its enlargement process. By granting candidate status prematurely, the EU not only weakened its own credibility but also empowered an increasingly authoritarian government. Instead of serving as an incentive for democratic reform, candidate status was misinterpreted as approval of the ruling party's actions. This narrative highlights the delicate balance between geopolitical strategy and democratic principles, raising the question of whether the EU can maintain its influence without compromising its fundamental values. As Georgia stands at a crossroads, the outcome remains uncertain, but one lesson is clear: democracy cannot be assumed – it must be actively defended.

The analysis of Georgia's political trajectory within the broader framework of EU democracy support reveals deep-seated tensions between institutional learning and entrenched policy approaches, particularly in the gap between rhetoric and action. Key European actors, including EU institutions – the European Commission, European Parliament and European Council – along with independent think tanks and media outlets, largely speak with one voice in shaping the discourse on democracy

support. These actors generally provide a well-founded assessment of both the progress and setbacks in Georgia's democratic development and the EU's role in fostering it. Notably, the European Parliament has been more vocal in condemning democratic backsliding and advocating for stricter conditions, while the European Commission has often prioritised geopolitical stability, at times at the expense of democratic rigor.

Overall, the EU appears to have made progress in institutional learning, particularly in refining its discourse on democracy support. However, the real challenge lies in translating this discourse into concrete policy decisions. The EU's decision to grant Georgia candidate status despite clear democratic regression underscores the complexities of its conditionality-based approach. As a result, rather than fostering democratic reform, the EU at times inadvertently reinforces authoritarian tendencies.

The trajectory of EU-Armenia relations across these three major turning points in modern Armenian politics reveals a narrative defined less by bold shifts than by hesitant pivots. At the outset, when Armenia reversed course in 2013 and declined to sign the Association Agreement – opting instead for the Russian-led Customs Union – the EU responded with studied restraint. It affirmed Armenia's sovereign right to choose its foreign policy path but remained notably silent on the domestic political conditions surrounding that choice. In privileging geopolitical non-confrontation, the EU effectively compromised on its democratic agenda. The increasingly authoritarian tendencies of then-President Serzh Sargsyan and former President Robert Kocharyan were not openly contested. Even in the face of credible reports of Russian pressure, the EU refused to frame Armenia as a victim of coercion or its leaders as complicit in democratic backsliding. This early episode foreshadowed a pattern: the EU consistently upheld the principle of sovereignty, but often at the expense of confronting autocratic drift. It cast itself as a neutral facilitator – ready to re-engage should Armenia choose to do so – rather than as a normative actor committed to defending democracy. In this early act, there was no clear villain and no hero – just a stage set with quiet compromises.

This posture extended into the next phase of relations, from the negotiation of the CEPA to the Velvet Revolution. Once again, the EU presented Armenia's foreign policy choices as freely taken, portraying the CEPA as a sovereign corrective after the failed Association Agreement. But the Velvet Revolution disrupted the narrative. With Nikol Pashinyan's unexpected rise, the EU discovered a protagonist it could champion. Pashinyan, a

former journalist turned opposition leader, came to symbolise the democratic aspirations of a society reclaiming its agency. His imprisonment in April 2018 was met with cautious concern by the EU, but his swift political ascent was embraced with enthusiasm. The revolution offered a rare moment in which Armenia was cast not merely as a partner, but as a democratic hero – a figure inspiring hope for genuine reform in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. The citizens, too, were elevated in Brussels' discourse, portrayed as the true authors of a democratic rebirth. For a brief moment, the plot was clear: the people of Armenia had stood up to autocracy, and their new leader embodied that spirit.

Yet the outbreak of the Second Karabakh War in 2020 disrupted this heroic narrative. The EU initially maintained its equidistance, calling for both Armenia and Azerbaijan to end hostilities without taking a firm position on responsibility. The conflict was framed as a bilateral dispute, and Pashinyan – the former democratic hero – was no longer a central figure in EU discourse. As violence escalated and human suffering mounted, the EU remained committed to a language of balance, urging dialogue rather than naming aggressors. Even after Azerbaijan's military advances, the displacement of Karabakh Armenians and the blockade of the Lachin Corridor, Baku was not clearly cast as the antagonist. This ambiguity may have been strategic, as the EU sought to deepen its energy partnerships with Azerbaijan following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In this part of the story, the hero was missing, and the villain had yet to be fully revealed.

That villain would emerge more clearly in 2022. Russia's failure to uphold its role as Armenia's security guarantor, coupled with its broader war of aggression in Ukraine, reshaped the EU's understanding of the South Caucasus. In abandoning its peacekeeping responsibilities under the CSTO and refusing to intervene during Azerbaijan's escalations, Russia effectively betrayed Armenia. This betrayal became a turning point in EU discourse. For the first time, Russia – not Azerbaijan – was framed as the principal threat to Armenia's security and democratic future. Moscow had not only failed to protect its supposed ally, but had also actively undermined the regional balance, further eroding its credibility. The EU began to reimagine Armenia's predicament not as a localised ethnic conflict, but as part of a broader contest between autocracy and democracy.

By 2023, this shift had fully taken root. The EU began to make explicit connections between Armenia's security and its democratic development. The deployment of the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA), though

modest in scope, marked a symbolic departure from earlier detachment. More significantly, EU officials began framing Azerbaijan's actions as 'hybrid attacks' on Armenia's constitutional order, while openly accusing Russia of betrayal. In this evolving narrative, the villain was now fully embodied by Putin's Russia – a former patron turned predator. Pashinyan, though still present, no longer held the same heroic glow; his democratic credentials were overshadowed by the scale of the crisis and his increasingly difficult position. The hero had become more diffuse – perhaps now located not in any one leader, but in Armenia's continued resilience as a struggling democracy under siege.

This narrative crystallised in late 2023 at a high-level summit between Armenian and EU leaders, joined by US officials. Here, Armenia's sovereignty, territorial integrity and democratic reforms were explicitly affirmed as interdependent. Commission President von der Leyen praised Armenia's democratic efforts and its cooperation in preventing sanctions circumvention – tying domestic governance to the broader geopolitical contest. The EU was no longer neutral. Armenia was now framed as a frontline state, facing external threats not merely to its borders but to its democratic identity.

Ultimately, the moral of the EU's story in Armenia is one of slow awakening. In the first two acts, the EU declined to play a central role, preferring to remain an observer and a facilitator. It offered choices, not protections. During these years, the hero was left to fend for himself, and the villain remained unspoken. Even the Second Karabakh War did not prompt immediate revaluation. But the cumulative effects of conflict, displacement and Russia's duplicity pushed the EU to revise its story. The once-neutral narrator began to choose sides. While EU institutions still move cautiously, a clearer consensus has emerged: Armenia's democratic fate is inseparable from its security, and both are threatened by actors hostile to European values. In this revised plotline, Russia now plays the villain, Armenia is the embattled hero, and the EU – at last – steps closer to being not just a narrator, but a supporting character in the unfolding drama.

Ultimately, the moral of the EU's story in Armenia is one of slow response. During the first two acts of this plot, the EU was reluctant to pick a side and preferred to let Armenia make its own foreign policy choices. In these instances, Armenia was cast as the author of its own destiny, while the EU merely offered opportunities, should Yerevan choose to

pursue them. Thus, the EU cannot be said to have drawn substantial lessons from its engagement with Armenia – whether during the 2013 collapse of the Association Agreement, the CEPA negotiations, or even the Velvet Revolution. Not even the Second Karabakh War significantly altered the EU's framing of the story, although its consequences clearly did. While the EU initially clung to a balanced approach, urging both sides to resolve their conflict, the peace imposed by Russia soon revealed itself to be fragile. When Moscow invaded Ukraine and abandoned its peacekeeping role in the South Caucasus, the EU found its villain. And although some EU officials eventually acknowledged the desperate situation Armenia had fallen into, the heroic figure of Pashinyan – once a symbol of democratic renewal – no longer inspired the EU to the same extent. This prevailing narrative was rarely contested within the EU; instead, it gradually metastasised across institutions. Certain actors, particularly in the European Parliament, had more room to speak freely, call out villains, or act more swiftly – yet by this stage in EU-Armenia relations, most operated according to the same assumptions.

The contestation among and within European actors concerning Ukraine has been shaped by evolving narratives, political discourse and policy responses, particularly in the wake of the Euromaidan protests and the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion. Applying the four methodological devices – setting, characters, plot and moral of the story – helps to analyse how these actors have engaged with Ukraine's democratic trajectory and European aspirations. Ukraine is primarily framed as a state in transition towards democracy, struggling to solidify its democratic institutions while facing external aggression and internal political challenges. The Euromaidan protests marked a critical shift, portraying Ukraine as a nation striving for European integration and democratic governance. Following the Russian invasion, the narrative intensified, reinforcing Ukraine's position as a frontline state defending not only its sovereignty but also European values. Within European institutions, Ukraine's struggle is often contextualised within broader geopolitical tensions, the EU's enlargement strategy and the principles of democracy promotion. However, contestation arises over the degree of conditionality applied to Ukraine's EU accession process, given the ongoing conflict and governance challenges.

The EU and its institutions, including the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council, are largely positioned as the guardians of democratic values and supporters of Ukraine's European

path. Member states, however, exhibit varying levels of commitment, leading to internal contestation over issues such as military aid, sanctions and the speed of integration. Ukraine's government and civil society emerge as heroes, resisting external aggression and pushing for reforms, but criticisms persist regarding corruption, rule-of-law issues and oligarchic influence. Russia is unanimously portrayed as the villain, undermining Ukraine's sovereignty and violating international norms. Within the EU, there is also contestation over the role of member states with close ties to Russia, such as Hungary.

The narrative of Ukraine's European integration is shaped by pivotal events, including the Euromaidan protests, the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas and the 2022 full-scale invasion. These events have driven shifts in European discourse and policy. Initially, EU actors emphasised conditionality, requiring reforms in governance, anti-corruption and judicial independence. However, the invasion reframed Ukraine's EU aspirations as a geopolitical imperative rather than a purely merit-based process. Contestation emerges over balancing fast-track accession with maintaining democratic standards, particularly regarding concerns over governance reforms. European institutions and member states also debate the effectiveness of sanctions, military support and financial assistance, with some advocating for more aggressive measures and others prioritising diplomatic solutions.

The moral of the story: The EU's response – imposing sanctions on Russia, providing financial and military aid to Ukraine, and granting Ukraine candidate status – reflects a shift in its approach to democracy support. The large-scale Russian invasion has reinforced the EU's understanding that Ukraine's security, sovereignty and future are intrinsically linked to Europe's own stability and security.

Overall, there has been minimal contestation between Ukraine's local communities of practice and the EU regarding the fundamental understanding of democracy, its values, and the mechanisms of democracy support. While some procedural disagreements have emerged – concerning priorities, target groups, or the sequencing of beneficiaries – these have not challenged the core principles of democracy promotion. Instead, democratic learning, both within the EU and Ukraine's local CoP, has evolved through experience, feedback and analysis of past democracy support initiatives in Ukraine.

Although some dissenting voices have surfaced, they have remained

politically marginal and largely inconsequential. Their critiques did not contribute to refining democracy support policies or improving democratic learning. Instead, they either opposed Ukraine's support altogether or questioned the legitimacy of democracy itself.

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PART II
DEMOCRATICNESS
OF EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY PRACTICES

6.
EU Foreign Policy Practices and Democracy Support in Lebanon

Jamil Mouawad, Karim Makdisi and Sarah Sabra

The European Union has had a lengthy and well-established relationship with Lebanon, specifically since the 1965 EEC-Lebanon Trade and Technical Cooperation Agreement (Dandashly 2022). Since then, the cooperation between the two has been on the basis of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood (European Commission 2021). Within the scope of this framework, EU member states have been providing considerable democracy support to Lebanon in various forms, ranging from bilateral financial assistance and supporting donor conferences (e.g. Paris I, II and III international donor conferences convened by France), to supporting civil society by working closely with and funding them, to monitoring elections and encouraging key policy reforms, to implementing EU international border management strategies and assisting with border governance in the country (see Tholens 2017, Ouazzani 2019).

From the analysis conducted, it is clear that the policies of the EU toward Lebanon are predominantly focusing on the interests of the EU with a top-bottom approach that is very short term and punctual. It is common to notice that policies of this nature are rarely constructive. Instead, such policies would tend to be flexible to a fault, focusing on funding provisions while solely increasing the European Union's soft power. In addition, policy formulation is top-down in nature, driven by the interests of the elite in power and aim at stabilising the system in place, while undermining state institutions, instead of serving or responding to the calls for civil society. Such a situation alienates local actors from local ownership and development on the issues and problems as such may only worsen the prevailing inequalities within Lebanon.

6.1 Migration and refugees

Lebanon is today known to have the highest refugee influx in the world both per capita and per square kilometre. Government statistics indicate around 1.5 million Syrian refugees.[1] This movement has put a heavy burden on the country's economy, infrastructure and public services, aggravating existing political and financial problems. In contrast to other host countries, Lebanon does not have any official refugee camps which means that the majority of refugees are stuck in very difficult situations where they simultaneously face legal, economic and residency restrictions as well as increasing violence against them during this crisis (ESCWA 2020). The European Union is reported to have provided the most funding for the Lebanon migration policy which has greatly affected the country's management of these populations.

Ever since the escalation in Syria shifted to open conflict in 2011, the country has had roughly 6.8 million people internally displaced and over 5.5 million citizens seeking refuge in bordering countries (UNHCR 2025). Taking into account its geographical closeness with Syria, Lebanon became one of the primary open border destinations, especially in the early phases of the Civil War. As a result, Lebanon received a large influx of refugees. This migratory crisis has made significant impacts on Lebanon's already strained social, economic and political environment. Simpson (2021) lists Lebanon as one of the top five nations to have suffered unprecedented loss of stability. Currently, with the economy being as rough, both the displaced Syrian refugees and impoverished Lebanese are forced to heavily rely on foreign aid. According to ESCWA (2020) reports, 90 per cent of the displaced Syrian population is living in extreme poverty while 55 per cent of the Lebanese population is below the poverty line.

The Lebanese crisis continues to deepen, and these refugees live in never-ending ambiguity where returning to Syria is unsafe but at the same time resettlement in a third country is shown as a possibility but not for all (RPW 2020).

6.1.1 What did the EU do?

Lebanon's migration policies are constructed according to the legal framework of the bilateral relations between the EU and Lebanon,

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[1] UNHCR website: *Lebanon*, https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries /lebanon.

manifested in the EU-Lebanon Association Agreement and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Action Plans. Migration has always been a salient factor of EU-Lebanon cooperation as seen and practiced since the signing of the Association Agreement in 2002, which reported illegal migration phenomena (HR/VP 2017). The first ENP Action Plan in 2007, which broadened the scope of cooperation to include migration, has considerably increased the focus on it (European Commission 2007). Gradually, the EU has attempted to increase the scope of its institutional relations with Lebanon, for example, with the new EU aid policy through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2009 which Fakhoury (2014:134) argues enabled more integrated external relations of the EU through its representation and delegation in Beirut.

As of 2017, the EU has allocated 1.2 billion euros for Lebanon which has been distributed through various cooperation programmes aimed at solving the issues that stemmed from the influx of refugees (HR/VP 2017). One of the most significant developments during this period was the introduction of the EU-Lebanon Compact in 2016, which sought to aid Lebanon manage the refugee crisis without further undermining the country's stability (EU-Lebanon Association Council 2016).

Simultaneously, the EU tried to improve migration governance with the Migration Partnership Framework of 2016, which placed focus on border control, curtailing irregular migration, and strengthening the institutional capacity of Lebanon (European Commission 2016). The EU also started exploring the possibility of a Mobility Partnership (MP) with Lebanon in 2014, but it was never really finalised, which is indicative of the difficult nature of migration policy (HR/VP 2017). These measures are part of the EU's overarching strategy of security-stability, which seeks to maintain a certain level of stability within the region in a bid to stave off additional migration to Europe (Roccu and Voltolini 2017).

6.1.2 Absences and presences

The European Union's attitude towards migration governance in Lebanon reflects some degree of social embeddedness as funds are given to the country without establishing new structures or reducing spending on the existing public service provisions. Taking into consideration Lebanon's deep recession, the EU has focused on critical areas such as health, education and social assistance. The Lebanese public services are already

overstretched, and this approach addresses the needs of both refugees as well as the host communities. However, despite this support, the EU does not explicitly condition its backing for border control on Lebanon's respect for non-refoulment, the principle prohibiting the forced return of individuals to countries where they face persecution or harm (HRW 2024). This lack of protective measures illustrates the gap in the EU's approach, where resources are channelled toward achieving security and stability at the expense of fully integrated measures to uphold the rights of refugees.

In addition, the EU's approach remains focused on containment rather than long-term empowerment. Policies fail to address economic integration, as there are no significant efforts to support legal work permits or employment pathways for Syrians in Lebanon. This reflects the EU's broader strategy of "governing migration from a distance", prioritising stability over meaningful socio-economic inclusion for refugees (Fakhoury 2020).

The way migratory movements are managed by the EU with respect to Lebanon raises concerns about its social accountability since it attempts to juggle funding, security and humanitarian issues at the same time. In regard to EU migration deals, Human Rights Watch has been quite critical because of the risk exposure to individuals, the erasure of asylum guarantees and the obliteration of the international protection system (HRW 2024). Officials from Lebanon like the former Foreign Minister, Gebran Bassil, have ridiculed the claims of financial aid by stating that it is not enough and rather needs a political resolution to be made for the socio-economic integration of Syrian refugees (L'Orient Today 2024). On the other hand, figures in Europe such as S&D Group President Gianni Pittella, while acknowledging the abundant hospitality shown by Lebanon, call on member states of the EU to do more than just express concern because there is more to do (Socialists and Democrats 2015). The May 2024 announcement by the European Commission of a 1 billion euro aid package is indicative of what the EU wants to achieve – stability in Lebanon (European Commission 2024). Detractors of the policy, however, note that the EU seems more interested in containment than more permanent solutions. Also, the Palestinian Human Rights Organization (PHRO) has defended the EU regional policy approach on the grounds that it purposely restricts mobility rather than attending to humanitarian needs, placing further limitations on those afflicted, which puts security and migrant protection in sharp contradiction to each other (Chaaban et al. 2018).

6.2 Security

Lebanon's security sector reforms as well as its EU's assistance schemes had originated from the protracted political instability, internal governance challenges, as well as regional conflicts. The country has been in constant crisis due to phenomena ranging from the fallout of the Syrian civil war, an influx of refugees to raging economic conditions, and even the activities of armed entities such as Hezbollah. Lebanon faced compounded and concomitant dysfunctions ranging from weak state institutions, rampant corruption, to severe absence of trust towards the security forces which crippled law enforcement and governance functions. In this scenario, international partners, the European Union in particular, aspired to augment Lebanon's security sector in rule of law, bring accountability and reform policing for greater social cohesion and stability.

6.2.1 What did the EU do?

The SSR Lebanon Project began in March 2016 with the support of the European Union and aimed at providing technical assistance to help the Lebanese authorities carry out security sector reforms (EU Neighbours South 2016). The project was implemented by FIIAPP and Civipol, which coordinated the use of European funds by key security institutions like the Lebanese Armed Forces and the General Directorate of General Security, analysts concentrating on internal organisation, communication and accountability boosting (FIIAPP 2021). In 2018, the EU registered a support package equalling 50 million euros, from which 46.6 million were dedicated to strengthening the rule of law, security and terrorism countermeasures until 2020 and 3.5 million targeted to support airport security at the Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport (EEAS 2018a). Also, the MED9 offered support for the Lebanese Armed Forces to help stabilise the southern part of Lebanon, which has been a conflict zone between Israel and Hezbollah (Hadjicostis 2024). The long-term goal of the project funded by the European Union is to develop a community policing model for Lebanon that enforces the law while promoting social harmony.

6.2.2 Absences and presences

The aim of the 'Promoting Community Policing in Lebanon' project, funded by the EU, is to develop a model of policing that is community-based, and

integrate it into the Internal Security Forces (ISF) as well as improve the capacity of municipal police, especially in the areas of human rights, NGO coordination and civic engagement (European Commission 2019). It correlates with overarching aims such as provision of safety and security through the fighting against terrorism and crime, fostering community relations, advocacy for human rights, and professionalism and better management within the ISF. While there is commendation for achieving user milestones such as graduating courses for police officers, renovations of police stations, and providing police officers with computer gadgets, several issues still remain unaddressed (FIIAPP 2025). According to UNDP a comprehensive set of operational or administrative policies relating to recruitment such as certified training for police personnel which raises questions of professionalism and accountability is still absent. Along with this the lacking of training in cultural sensitivity can make trust with various groups within the community difficult to obtain (Burdett 2016). The "Promoting Community Policing in Lebanon" project has received some praise for making the police serve the society in a more broad-based, inclusive and computerised manner (European Commission 2019). However, Middle East Institute has expressed caution related to this approach. Community policing may not be relevant in a country like Lebanon, which has many problems, especially in relation to socio-political power structures, therefore, the reforms may not be as effective (Mazzola 2018).

In addition, International Alert and Lebanon Support discuss how implementing security measures like curfews and armed raids against Syrian refugees is a potential danger to human rights and self-respect (International Alert and Lebanon Support 2016). Instead, they suggest a more genuine and proactive approach towards policing that is community-centred and does not contribute to the feelings of insecurity that the Lebanese people, as well as the refugees, experience.

6.3. Border management

6.3.1 What did the EU do?

EU's partner, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) is tasked with the project titled Strengthening Capability for Integrated Border Management in Lebanon (ICMPD 2023). Under the project, ICMPD is supposed to assist Lebanese authorities in border management while ensuring that trade and the movement of legitimate travellers

are done in a safe manner. The Initiative promotes cooperation between the Lebanese Armed Forces, General Security, Lebanese Custom Administration, Internal Security Forces and Lebanese Civil Defence. In March 2021, ICMPD working with NATO affiliated Multinational CIMIC Group initiated the provision of civil-military relations technical assistance focusing on stability and security within the border zones (EU Neighbours South 2021). Adding to this effort, the EU in together announced a package of 1 billion euros announced in June 2024 for the period stretching from 2024 to 2027 to be spent on improving basic services and economic reforms as well as strengthening Lebanese security agencies through the provision of equipment and border management training (AFP 2024). This was part of the EU Lebanon partnership priorities set in 2016 which created a space for political cooperation towards Lebanon's stability and democracy with a strengthened commitment to integrated border management and coordination between the security institutions (European Commission 2016).

6.3.2 Absences and presences

The EU-sponsored border control projects in Lebanon are intended to improve coordination among various Lebanese security agencies by blending them into the institutional framework, rather than establishing an external one. This method takes into account Lebanon's multifaceted security environment, which includes border confrontations with Israel and the presence of Hezbollah. These policies, though, ignore the informal networks that profoundly inform border interactions. The projects' main emphasis is on security, but it also has social and economic aspects like trade, movement and employment. This broad concept seeks to improve local governance through capacity building and technical support, thereby increasing institutional legitimacy and responsiveness towards border communities. Still, without more social embeddedness, the risk is that of excluding some of the most vulnerable such as refugees and informal workers. In addition, looking at the issue of migrant smuggling primarily as a matter of national security does not tackle the real causes of the problem: poverty, closed immigration policies and democratic underdevelopment, pointing to the absence of a well-thought-out migration policy. Additionally, "The politics of resilience-building, which is the cornerstone of the EU's refugee response […], has left the ruling elite unscathed and intact" (Fakhoury 2020).

The EU's border management policies in Lebanon were faced with scepticism from rights organisations. In a joint report, the Lebanese Centre for Human Rights claims that European policies seem to be largely aimed at curtailing people's movement while also infringing on their most basic right – to leave one's country and seek asylum elsewhere (CLDH 2023). Amnesty International and EuroMed Rights, together with ACHR, publicly addressed the relevant companies stating that both Lebanese and EU countries have to comply with international law and do not have the right to return the refugees to Syria – a country that is fraught with potential harms for the refugees (ACHR et al. 2024). This critique emphasises the necessity for border management policies to be framed and implemented within a legal framework that aligns with international law and human rights standards.

6.4 Democracy and elections

The European Union has played an active role in Lebanon's democratic processes, particularly through its involvement in both parliamentary and presidential elections. In Lebanon, the EU has aimed to enhance electoral integrity, promote political stability and ensure greater representation of citizens.

6.4.1 What did the EU do?

A significant phenomenon in Lebanon's political landscape was the Parliamentary Elections of 2005, 2009, 2018 and 2022 (EEAS 2022a). The European Union paid significant attention to the events as it was directly involved in monitoring the elections and reforming. The EU installed Election Observation Missions for every one of these elections with the intention of improving transparency, credibility and the overall integrity of the elections like in the case of issuing Preliminary Statements concerning the Parliamentary elections that were conducted on 15 May 2022, wherein around 200 observers were deployed. These activities were supposed to assess and report on the status of the elections and work on improvements.

The EU also lobbied the adoption of proportional representation and helped draft Lebanon's 2017 election law, which was the first to introduce proportionality in the country's history (IFES 2018). The shift was meant to accommodate more political representation inside the country's sectarian based political system. The change also prompted the EU to encou-

rage the Lebanese government to allow and enhance women's engagement in politics to raise the standard of political representation which is critical for any democracy (EEAS 2018c). Though the number of female candidates increased in the 2018 elections, only six women were elected suggesting that female representation in Lebanese parliamentary politics continues to be low and restricted due to systemic obstacles to women's active political participation. These efforts respond to a broader call to improve democracy and enhance the electoral system in Lebanon.

6.4.2 Absences and presences

The European Union has continued a political dialogue with Lebanon on human rights, democracy and the rule of law as specified in the EU-Lebanon Partnership Priorities of November 2016 (EEAS 2018b). These priorities reflect the EU's efforts in working with Lebanon's civil society and improving the effectiveness and accountability of the Lebanese public institutions, especially the justice system. When it comes to parliamentary elections, the EU Election Observation Mission (EOM) significantly recommended reforms that led to the adoption of the new proportional representation system, voting by Lebanese citizens abroad and improved secrecy of the ballot during the 2018 elections (EEAS 2018c). All of these measures were designed to increase the level of competition and choice in elections. Notably, none out of the 25 EU EOM 2018 recommendations were fully accepted, which proves it is still difficult to implement reform ideas in these structures (EEAS 2022b). In addition, the EU has worked with the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform (CCER) to demand an improvement of the electoral transparency and accountability (Melhem 2022). The Civil Society Knowledge Centre however argues that the chronic political situation in Lebanon does obstruct the proper application of these changes (Tavana and Parreira 2019).

In their reports, the European Council on Foreign Relations and Carmen Jeha have emphasised a shift from engaging elites to empowering activists and ordinary citizens trying to manoeuvre through the country's convoluted and corrupt systems (Geha 2021). In a similar vein, the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) has raised alarm over more pronounced problems like electoral malpractice in vote buying, media partisanship and absence of an independent electoral supervising body, arguing that much of the support and even policies of the EU should be more focused to solve these problems (UNDP 2022). These comments,

among others, demonstrate the difficulties in enhancing democratic governance in Lebanon.

6.5. Presidential elections

6.5.1 What did the EU do?

After the end of President Michel Aoun's term in November 2022, there was a worrying gap in presidential rule. The EU expressed worries about the absence of political structure in the country. In response, EU High Representative Josep Borrell said that leaders should act fast to choose a new president and government, and added that a delayed action could lead to aggravating the consequences of the economic crisis to public order and social security (L'Orient Today 2022).

The election of Joseph Aoun as President of Lebanon in January 2025 filled a vacuum in the country. The EU offered its congratulations to the new president and praised the Lebanese parliament for broad consensus, stressing the importance of national unity as well as an optimistic approach toward political stabilisation and socio-economic recovery (HR/VP 2025). In addition to diplomatic activity, the EU has engaged in supporting the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform, CCER, a network of civil society organisations that advocate comprehensive reforms of voting processes (Melhem 2022). These changes are intended to increase the representation of the citizens, the accountability and transparency of elections, and deepening democracy in Lebanon.

In terms of financial support, the EU provided funding through the European Neighbouring Instrument (ENI), allocating resources to numerous fields, including democracy and governance issues and electoral activities (Lannon 2015). This support has eased the implementation of reforms, enhanced governance structures through multi-stakeholder capacity development and good governance systems. As much as the European Union's involvement signals its intent in Lebanon's democratic growth, the realities brought about by local politics and the firm grip of legacy power structures make the all-encompassing changes in elections and governance very difficult to achieve.

6.5.2 Absences and presences

Lebanon is a deeply divided society, and the office of the president, which has historically been assigned to a Maronite Christian, is a major power

holder crucial in sustaining the delicate sociopolitical equilibrium. The European Union has continuously insisted on the proper conduct of presidential elections within the stipulated time frame and without delays, in particular to focus on the internal unity of the country to facilitate political order, reconstruction and economic growth (HR/VP 2025). In the institutional responses, including those of the EU High Representative, the EU has commended the Lebanese parliament for what appears to be responsible behaviour by a broad consensus, the need for a reforming government to resolve the multitude problems at hand (HR/VP 2025). Notwithstanding, the concern is that the policies serve much of EU interests, and too little for the public alongside inadequate attention and efforts put forth toward democracy-friendly changes. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance pointed out that there is a discrepancy between the EU statements and its actions in advocacy of democracy and reforms for fear of enabling the ordinary citizens and grassroots movements to take over and reshuffle the political landscape (Khatib 2009). This belief may restrain democratisation by placing a premium on order as opposed to greatly needed change.

To conclude, the EU's diplomacy illustrates its engagement and commitment to Lebanon's political stability. However, their devised strategy could incorporate broader engagement on elite capture of governance would increase the effectiveness of Europe's support towards Lebanon's democratic governance.

6.6 Trade

The European Union and twelve Southern Mediterranean countries agreed on a coordinated approach to the political, economic and social issues facing them, which was announced in the Barcelona declaration in 1995. The declaration recognises the objective of turning the Mediterranean basin into an area of dialogue, exchange and cooperation guaranteeing peace, stability and prosperity, requires a strengthening of democracy and respect for human rights, sustainable and balanced economic and social development, measures to combat poverty and promotion of greater understanding between cultures, as essential aspects of partnership. The signatories to the agreement accordingly agreed to establish a comprehensive partnership among the participants the Euro Mediterranean region through strengthened political dialogue on a regular basis, the de-

velopment of economic and financial cooperation and greater emphasis on the social, cultural and human dimension, these being the three aspects of the Euro Mediterranean partnership.

For Lebanon, the EU accounted for a small share of its exports, which was 14 percent for Lebanon in 2022. Greece was Lebanon's main trading partner in the EU with about three quarters of Lebanese exports on metals, and a remainder of foodstuff and chemical products. Lebanon's imports from Greece were instead largely refined petroleum products. The second largest EU exporter to Lebanon was Italy, with mineral products, machines, jewellery and chemical products accounting for the bulk of imports.

It was envisaged that the trade agreements would lead to greater integration within the region as a lowering of the cost of trade among the Southern Mediterranean countries would help to promote trade among them. However, there was no trend increase in the share of exports from Lebanon to the region.

Lebanon's exports to the EU seem to have become less diversified. For Lebanon, the decrease in diversification in recent years reflects the expansion in metal exports, namely scrap metal.

Notwithstanding these conclusions, an assessment of the effect of the trade agreements would need to be considered in the context of these countries' overall relationship with the EU. Even though these countries may not have benefited directly from the agreements as had been envisaged, there could have been other non-economic benefits that are associated with them.

Conclusion

The interventions of the EU in Lebanon have been described and critiqued for lacking democracy, especially in matters of security, migration and governance. The EU pledged about 1 billion euros to Lebanon, out of which 200 million was specifically meant for security forces, demonstrating a lack of clear oversight and collaboration, and undermining democracy through civil society and parliament (Tholens and Sophia 2024). Increasingly, EU aid is directed toward levelling tensions among Lebanon's security apparatus. This policy prioritises short-term stability over governance reforms that could help democratisation in Lebanon in the long run (Tholens and Sophia 2024). Such a policy prioritises relative stability

over democratic prospects in Lebanon, is punctual, short-term and relatively dependent on the availability of funds. The EU's approach has been largely unchanged, favouring security-focused interventions that mitigate immediate tensions rather than implementing governance reforms that could drive long-term democratisation. This persistence in policy demonstrates not only a continuity in their actions but also a failure to learn from past outcomes. By continuing to direct funds toward security at the expense of strengthening democratic institutions, the EU seems unwilling or unable to shift its focus toward reforms that would empower civil society, promote political accountability and foster true democratic change in Lebanon.

This democratic deficiency is also evident in how the EU approaches migration policies. Funds disbursed by the European Union with the intention of managing migration abuses have contributed to human rights violations such as the criminalisation and deportation of Syrian refugees from Lebanon. The EU's showed willingness to "look the other way" at such violations is in direct contradiction to their stated democratic values which emphasise human rights and the protection of at-risk groups (Stachelhaus 2024). In the same vein, Kaschowitz and Baravi (2024) contend that EU money enhances the Lebanese security forces' capacity which would allow them to breach international law. Not only it contradicts general international human rights norms, but also demonstrates a domineering attitude that shuns democratic values in exchange for greater control of borders.

A joint public statement by eight civil society organisations (ACHR et al. 2024) states that a potential "EU-Lebanon migration deal" could erode asylum protection and undermine the international protection system as a whole. This deal, in essence, undermines democratic principles and humanitarian aid by treating refugees as problems to be contained. It indicates a shift from an aid first approach to a more malicious and border centric one.

Stassen (2023) contends that the EU's move from a normative paradigm to realism regarding Lebanon, especially with the Single Support Framework (SSF) and the Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP), has further diminished democratic values. Stassen notes that the EU's funding approaches are biased against small organisations, which would participate in and strengthen a more democratic civil society. These practices not only risk deepening the undemocratic approaches but also impede

the development of a robust and adequately representative civil society, which is essential for any democratic governance.

Tholens and Ruffa (2023) go further and claim that while providing European security assistance, there is too much focus on post-colonial factors of power that aid the top bottom development of neocolonialism instead of promoting democratic relations. Unlike the EU model, US model imposes is relatively more pragmatic and presents local partners a clear set of expectations such as measurable outcomes and performance benchmarks, in contrast to the EU model, which often takes a more flexible, long-term approach without clearly defined criteria for success. The EU equally maintains a form of democracy undermining patron-client relationship with the citizens of the recipient states.

To sum up, the EU approach appears to focus strongly on regionally relevant socio-economic issues but in reality promotes a form of development that is more authoritarian and security-centric as opposed to encouraging democracy. While the European Union speaks of democracy and human rights, it appears that its policies within Lebanon are more pragmatic and are focused on maintaining security and stability. This conflict of speech and action weakens the democratic governance in Lebanon.

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7.
Democracy and Security
in EU Foreign Policy Practices in Palestine

Akram Ezzamouri

The European Union has long positioned itself as an actor committed to supporting democracy in the Southern neighbourhood and Palestine, including through its foreign policy instruments. Since the early 1990s, democracy support has been an important pillar of EU external relations, evolving through a range of tools and strategies aimed at strengthening democratic governance in its partner countries. However, despite the EU's extensive engagement with third countries on democratic reforms, a systematic investigation of the democratic quality as well as a focus on continuity and changes in its foreign policy, particularly in relation to democratic norms, has remained underexplored in the literature. Furthermore, much of the existing research has focused on isolated policy sectors (e.g., trade, aid, migration) without delving into the broader question of how these diverse fields interact with democratic practices on the ground.

This chapter seeks to address this gap by examining the democraticness of EU policies in the field of democracy and security in Palestine, with particular attention to the shifting dynamics in the wake of significant historic critical junctures. The central research question driving this research is: How democratic are EU practices in the field of democracy and security in Palestine, and what changes can be observed in these practices following 7 October 2023, especially in terms of social empowerment, social embeddedness and social accountability? By analysing these dimensions, the chapter aims to offer insights into how EU policies can either support or undermine democracy in Palestine and assess whether the EU's engagement in Palestine has become more or less democratic in the face of recent developments.

This study draws from the conceptual and empirical work of Khakee and Wolff (2022) on EU democracy projection, examining EU's everyday interactions in the Southern neighbourhood in various policy fields (e.g., trade, gender, civil society) to explore whether these interactions uphold democratic norms. Extending their work in line with this book's introduction, this chapter will focus on the assessment of democraticness of EU foreign policy in Palestine. The developing realities of Palestinian politics in a context of Israeli unlawful occupation and settler colonialism present a key case-study to assess how democratic norms are challenged or reinforced *in EU practices by EU practices*, particularly in its foreign policy.

The research is based on both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources include policy and academic literature on EU policies in Palestine, particularly in the areas of security and civil society engagement. Primary data are based on semi-structured interviews with civil society actors and experts in Palestine, conducted via Zoom in July and September 2024. These focused on perceptions of the democratic nature of EU foreign policy in Palestine, especially in relation to security governance and civil society support. Participants were informed of the research purpose and gave their consent. All interviews have been anonymised in accordance with ethical guidelines.

7.1 Defining the concept of democraticness

To examine the democraticness of EU foreign policy, with a focus on EU security instruments and civil society organisations (CSOs) support in Palestine, this chapter employs a conceptual framework as developed in Chapter 1 based on three interrelated dimensions of democracy in external practices: *social embeddedness*, *social empowerment*, as well as *social accountability*.

Social embeddedness refers to the degree to which EU security policies are integrated into and responsive to local social, political and cultural contexts. In the case of Palestine, this involves considering how EU democracy support and interventions in the security sector and CSOs support align with Palestinian realities and whether these policies incorporate local actors and knowledges in meaningful ways. EU policies in the field of security and democracy are assessed on their inclusivity and transparency, specifically whether they include not only state-level/elite actors but also Palestinian civil society and affected communities. As the

EU increasingly pursues a more "top-down" approach to security, the question arises as to whether these policies respect the agency, local ownership and needs of local communities or whether they risk imposing external models that disregard the context of occupation and settler colonialism.

For instance, the EU's support for Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces through initiatives like the EU Police Mission in the Palestinian Territories (EUPOL COPPS) raises critical questions about whether these efforts have embedded local needs into security initiatives and reforms or whether they have, in effect, further entrenched a political order that marginalises certain actors within Palestinian society. Social embeddedness also examines whether EU-funded security and CSOs support policies are transparent and accountable, with affected communities having access to relevant information and the ability to influence decision-making processes. This dimension interrogates whether the EU's approach to security is participatory and if it supports democratic engagement at all levels, including the inclusion of grassroots organisations, marginalised groups and women.

On the other hand, *social empowerment* concerns the capacity of EU policies to either foster democratic practices from within Palestinian society or, conversely, impose external (democratic) models that may be misaligned with local needs. This dimension is closely related to the idea of democracy as a "pluriversal" concept, which recognises that democratic practices are shaped by historical, social and cultural factors.[1]

Do EU behavioural practices engage with Palestinian aspirations for democracy, or do they focus on narrow definitions of security interests, potentially sidelining the needs of local civil society and grassroots actors? Social empowerment also entails the recognition of Palestinian rights of self-determination, questioning whether EU policies seek to empower local institutions and actors to address their own security challenges, or whether they merely seek to stabilise a political system that serves external perceptions of security.

Finally, *social accountability* refers to the mechanisms through which those affected by EU policies – particularly the Palestinian population –

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[1] In the Palestinian context this means an evaluation of whether EU interventions in the security sector and CSO support respect and amplify local democratic imaginaries or whether they impose a standardised model of democracy, often based on EU norms that may not resonate with Palestinian realities.

are able to hold EU actors accountable for the outcomes of their security interventions. This dimension encompasses the availability of avenues for feedback, participation, and the possibility for policy reforms based on local concerns. Accordingly, for EU security practices to be considered democratic, mechanisms for Palestinian civil society and grassroots actors to engage in the policy process should be in place, including the evaluation of ongoing EU security projects. In Palestine, the issue of accountability takes on added significance due to the power imbalances inherent in the EU-Palestinian relationship, which operates as a funder-beneficiary dynamic. The following pages will explore whether these accountability mechanisms are present or whether EU policies are practiced without sufficient checks, leaving local populations disenfranchised and disempowered.

7.2 Assessing democraticness of EU foreign policy practices in Palestine

This framework guides the analysis of EU security practices in Palestine, particularly reflecting on changes (if any) following the selected critical juncture of 7 October 2023, date of the Hamas attacks in Israel and intensification of Israel's violence on Palestinian people in Gaza and West Bank. The framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how EU interventions in democracy support and in the security sector might reinforce or challenge democracy in Palestine, taking into account local dynamics and the broader political context. Through this lens, the chapter evaluates whether EU security sector policies and CSOs support are contributing to the promotion of democratic practices or whether they are exacerbating existing power imbalances.

By examining the evolving EU approach to Palestine in general and to its security in particular, I seek to offer insights into how the EU can enhance the democratic quality of its foreign policy practices, particularly in conflict-affected contexts like Palestine. The following sections will explore the historical context of EU foreign policies in Palestine, the democraticness of EU policies in the fields of security and CSO support in the context of key turning points, and the democracy implications of these (non-)changes in terms of social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability.

7.2.1 A security-first paradigm

Since the early 1990s, the European Union has positioned itself as a key actor in the Middle East, particularly in Palestinian territories, where it has focused on supporting state-building efforts and peace processes. As outlined by Tartir (2018), in the wake of the Oslo Accords (1993-1999), the EU and its member states began to channel substantial financial and technical resources into creating the institutions of a future Palestinian state. The approach was clear: by establishing effective governance structures – including security apparatuses – the Palestinians could eventually transition toward a democratic system capable of securing lasting peace and stability. However, from the outset, the EU's security interventions have been marked by a "security-first" paradigm (Tartir 2018) that privileged control over democratisation.

Early EU interventions focused on establishing the PA as a quasi-state institution, with initial projects emphasising administrative capacity-building and the development of basic security structures (Bouris 2014). With the signing of the Oslo Accords, the EU sought to support the nascent PA by financing the expansion of its security forces, an effort that was intended to bolster internal order through security coordination with Israel and provide the groundwork for further political reforms within the PA. Yet, even in these early years, tensions were evident between the imperatives of state-building and the Palestinian desire for self-determination (Tartir 2018). The technical assistance provided by the EU was designed primarily to support the transformation of the PA's institutions – often with a strong emphasis on law enforcement and counter-insurgency measures – without fully integrating the local political and social context of Palestine as a quasi-/non-state under Israeli occupation and practices of ongoing de facto annexation (Interview 1).

The Second Intifada marked a critical turning point in donors support and consequently in Palestinian practices and reforms in the security sector (Tartir 2018). Amid widespread violence and the dismantling of earlier institutional gains, the EU was forced to rethink its strategy and tackle the resulting "security vacuum" that necessitated immediate remedial action. In response, the EU, in coordination with other international donors, launched a series of rapid capacity-building programmes. Initiatives such as the PA's 100-Day Reform Plan and the subsequent Road Map for peace were implemented with an urgent focus on reconstructing the security forces, through technical capacity-building: training programmes, equip-

ment provision and the professionalisation of security forces were prioritised as essential measures to restore order and create a precondition for further state-building (Bouris 2014).

After 2007, as the PA embarked on the so-called post-2007 state-building project (Tartir 2015), EU interventions in the security sector became more institutionalised and extensive. The establishment of the EUPOL COPPS mission exemplified this shift (Council of the EU 2005). Initially launched as a technical support mission for the Palestinian Civil Police (PCP), EUPOL COPPS was gradually transformed into a long-term project with broader objectives. Its non-executive mandate expanded from basic capacity-building to include advising on rule-of-law issues and coordinating EU financial support for security sector reform in Palestine. Yet, these interventions were not implemented in a vacuum. Operating in a context of contested statehood – complicated by Israeli occupation and internal Palestinian political fragmentation – the EU's efforts to support Palestinian security forces have often had (unintended) consequences that undermined the broader goals of democratic transformation (Bouris and İşleyen 2018, Bouris 2019).

Scholars such as Mustafa (2015), Tartir (2018) and Bouris (2019) have argued that EU security policy in Palestine has, in effect, contributed to the entrenchment of authoritarian practices by reinforcing a security apparatus that is more accountable to external donors (as the EU and its member states) than to the Palestinian citizenry. Dana (2023) further highlights the paradox inherent in the EU's rhetoric on democracy support: while the EU publicly and discursively champions liberal democratic values, its security interventions in Palestine have primarily been designed to enforce stability and control, often defined on terms that serve the interests of external actors (like Israel) and maintain the status quo.

Social empowerment

A core element of the EU's security policy in Palestine has been its emphasis on technical capacity-building as a means of empowering Palestinian security forces. Through initiatives such as EUPOL COPPS, the EU has sought to instill internationally recognised best practices in policing and public order management. Training programmes, modern equipment and standardised procedures have been central to this process, with the goal of creating a professional security apparatus capable of maintaining order and enforcing the rule of law.

In theory, these measures are meant to empower the PA by enabling it to assume greater responsibility for internal security and ultimately to function as a credible, independent state institution. Technical capacity-building, as declared and implemented by the EU, aims to develop the competencies of security personnel and improve organisational effectiveness and professionalism. However, the emphasis on technical reform has also had the unintended consequence of reinforcing a narrow model of empowerment – one that privileges external standards over local political realities (Bouris 2019). While Palestinian security forces have undoubtedly benefited from enhanced technical skills, these improvements have often come at the expense of broader democratic participation. The focus on efficiency and operational readiness has meant that capacity-building efforts rarely extend to incorporating mechanisms for local oversight or public accountability (Tartir and Edjus 2017).

Moreover, as reflected in Dana's (2023) critique of the 2006 elections and subsequent EU practices in Palestine, the technical empowerment of the security apparatus was used to reinforce a stability agenda that favoured – and therefore included or excluded – certain political actors over others. The EU's technical interventions, while declaredly successful in improving operational capacities (Tartir and Edjus 2017), have been deployed in a manner that sidelines broader political and social empowerment. Rather than fostering inclusive security governance that allows for genuine local input, the emphasis on capacity-building has, in many cases, entrenched the authority of a centralised security establishment (the PA) that is both heavily funded and externally influenced (Tartir and Edjus 2017).

Social embeddedness

This selective form of social empowerment has also shaped how EU foreign policy practices in the field of security and of support to democratic CSOs were embedded in the Palestinian context.

In the case of EU security policy in Palestine, the approach has been characterised by a strong elitist ownership (Tartir and Edjus 2017) and external orientation (Bouris 2019). From the outset, the EU's interventions were premised on the idea that a secure environment was a necessary condition for state-building (Bouris 2014, Bouris and İşleyen 2018). However, this approach has securitised the peace process within the Oslo paradigm, established by the 1993 and 1995 accords, which framed negotiations as the sole path to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and fostered the

illusion of two equal parties while masking the profound power asymmetry between Israel and the Palestinians. As Bouris (2019) notes, the operationalisation of EUPOL COPPS in the West Bank has produced numerous unintended consequences. Although non-executive in nature, the mission has reinforced power imbalances by aligning its mandates and activities with external actors – most notably Israel – shaping Palestinian state-building around external stabilisation imperatives rather than local democratic aspirations. This external orientation is manifest in the way EU policies are designed: the benchmarks of success are frequently determined by the satisfaction of external partners, particularly Israel, rather than by the extent to which Palestinian needs and perspectives are addressed (Interview 1, Bouris 2014, Bouris and İşleyen 2018).

The EU's security policy has thus been embedded in a model that prioritises the normalisation of occupation. This model is fundamentally at odds with the idea of democracy support and democraticness of EU foreign practices as defined in this volume, which requires the integration of local realities and local voices and a bottom-up approach to governance and reform. Instead, the EU's interventions have been driven by a "security-first" logic that treats the occupied Palestinian Territories as a contested space where external stability must be enforced (Interview 1). This approach not only marginalises local political dynamics but also risks perpetuating the very structures of domination – such as the settler-colonial framework – that the EU ostensibly seeks to transform (European Commission 2022). Dana (2023) encapsulates this paradox by arguing that the EU's insistence on stability, rather than democratisation, reinforces an external definition of security that ultimately undermines local processes of self-determination.

The limits of the embeddedness of EU foreign policy practices in Palestine are also visible in its CSOs support both before and, more sharply, after the events of 7 October. While the EU formally supports democracy and local ownership, its interventions have often reinforced donor-led and elite-centred models of engagement. Civil society in Palestine, particularly since the Oslo Accords, has been reshaped by a donor-driven paradigm that marginalises grassroots actors in favour of "NGOised" (Dana 2013) structures more aligned with external expectations.

As one Palestinian interviewee noted, "Since Oslo, civil society in Palestine has increasingly meant NGOs. Unions, social movements and political movements have been marginalised and depoliticised" (Interview 2). The

continued politicisation of aid and financially imposed depoliticisation of civil society through clauses or tailored calls for proposals has led to the marginalisation of broader movements, and as the interviewee elaborated further: "The EU has shaped the way civil society looks like in Palestine. It's a donor-driven model where NGOs receive funding but are constrained by conditions that make it difficult for them to engage in any political action" (Interview 2). This critique is supported by an earlier interview, where it was noted that "the European funding model has led to the erosion of grass-roots activism in Palestine. Instead of funding locally-driven projects, the EU has prioritised large-scale, donor-driven initiatives that do not reflect the actual needs or aspirations of the people" (Interview 1).

The situation is further complicated by the EU's tendency to impose conditions on Palestinian civil society organisations receiving EU funding. Consequently, in this donor-beneficiary asymmetry, "especially following the 7 October [critical juncture], the EU decides who is a good civil society and who is a bad civil society. [EU donors] fund only those organisations that adhere to the EU agenda, and if an organisation does not comply with their political requirements, it risks losing funding" (Interview 2) This selective approach to funding, which ties assistance to political loyalty or adherence to definitions of acceptable political activity, has significantly limited Palestinian civil society's ability to function freely and hold both local and international actors accountable. As stated by a CSO representative, "That's not democracy, when you need to ask every single participant to your workshop or your collaborators if their family is from an enlisted political faction or whether they are part of any political movement. That's interference and that's basically shrinking our space" (Interview 2).

Social accountability

Accountability is a cornerstone of democratic governance, yet it has proven to be one of the most challenging dimensions for the EU's foreign policy practices in Palestine. The interventions undertaken by the EU – particularly those associated with the security sector – have largely been technocratic in nature, focusing on training, equipment provision and procedural reforms. Although these measures are implemented with the stated goal of fostering transparency and the rule of law, in practice they often fall short of establishing robust mechanisms of local accountability.

EUPOL COPPS, for example, was introduced with the aim of mentoring the Palestinian Civil Police and promoting civilian oversight. However, as

noted by numerous observers, including Tartir (2018), Bouris (2019) and Mustafa (2015), the mission's lack of an executive mandate and its reliance on external standards have contributed to the reproduction of authoritarian practices. The PA's security forces, empowered through technical training, have evolved into a professionalised yet unaccountable institution. Instead of becoming instruments of democratic governance, they have frequently been used as tools of repression, employed to maintain order and suppress dissent in a context where the interests of external donors and the strategic imperatives of Israel are paramount. This dynamic has reinforced an elite-dominated security structure, where decision-making remains concentrated within EU institutions and the PA's upper echelons. Consequently, the broader Palestinian population has been largely excluded from having a meaningful influence on its governance (Tartir and Edjus 2017).

Politically, the disconnect between the EU's rhetoric for democracy support and its practical interventions becomes especially apparent in the aftermath of key events, such as the 2006 Palestinian elections. Although the elections were conducted in a manner that was widely recognised as free and fair,[2] the EU's subsequent refusal to engage with the Hamas-led government exposed a significant gap between rhetoric and practice, underscoring how external security and political considerations have often overridden wider local practices and democratic aspirations. This selective approach not only delegitimised the democratic processes in the eyes of many Palestinians (Interviews 1, 2 and 3) but also underscored how accountability mechanisms were subordinated to external security and political considerations. The lack of effective local oversight in these security interventions has left the PA's security apparatus largely shielded from larger public scrutiny, thus enabling the persistence of practices that are antithetical to democratic accountability (Tartir and Edjus 2017).

Moreover, the evaluation for EU security interventions are often externally defined, with success not being measured by the extent to which the local population benefits from improved governance (Interviews 1 and 3). This external calibration of accountability not only undermines the legitimacy of the security forces but also contributes to a broader erosion

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[2] See European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) website: *Mapping Palestinian Politics: Legislative Elections (2006)*, https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_palestinian_politics/legislative-elections-2006.

of public trust in the state-building process and practices in support to democracy. In refugee camps and rural areas in the West Bank, many perceive EU-backed reforms as disconnected from their realities, reinforcing mistrust in a system that doesn't prove to be accountable to local communities (Tartir and Edjus 2017). In essence, while the EU's security policy has succeeded in creating a technically operative security apparatus, it has simultaneously entrenched power asymmetries and fostered a governance model that is disconnected from the democratic aspirations of the wider Palestinian people. Moreover, by prioritising institutional stability over inclusive participation, the EU has contributed to widen the gap between Palestinian governance structures and the broader Palestinian public (Interviews 1, 2 and 3), undermining the legitimacy of its interventions and fostering negative perceptions among those directly or indirectly affected by security sector practices under EUPOL COPPS and the Palestinian Civil Police.

7.3 Absence of (un)learning

Following the attacks on 7 October 2023 by Hamas, and Israel's military campaign on Gaza and escalating violence in the West Bank, the EU's response to the evolving situation in Palestine has brought to light the contradictions in its approach to democracy support and the democratic nature of its practices in foreign policy. While the EU has allocated over 1.16 billion euros in humanitarian aid since 7 October, its policy interventions in the political sphere, beyond the Comprehensive Programme for Recovery and Resilience with the PA (European Commission 2024), confirm significant limitations in its diplomatic and institutional strategies for addressing the complex situation in Palestine (Akgül-Açıkmeşe and Özel 2024). Besides hindering the EU's ability to address the challenges arising in Israel-Palestine, these limitations indicate a political positioning that favours maintaining structures of control rather than fostering democratic reforms (Interviews 1 and 2).

The EU's inability to reassess its relationship with Israel and its continued support for the PA and its security apparatus – despite widespread local discontent and the PA's entanglement in sustaining the Israeli occupation – further entrenches structural injustices. This inaction is particularly stark given the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) 2024 conclusion that Israel's occupation is unlawful, and its preliminary

finding that Israel's actions in Gaza may plausibly constitute violation of the rights under the Genocide Convention. At the same time, the ICJ and leading human rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch, B'Tselem, Amnesty International, Al Haq and the UN Special Rapporteur have formally described the Israeli regime across the occupied Palestinian territory as an apartheid structure, citing systemic racial domination and institutionalised discrimination (see Ezzamouri and Zenobio 2023). Despite this, besides statements calling for a ceasefire, the EU has neither consistently intervened to halt the ongoing structural violence, including in the West Bank, nor has it meaningfully challenged the one-state reality that denies Palestinians fundamental political and civil rights (Interviews 1, 2 and 3).

Leaked documents related to the EU mission EUPOL COPPS dated 20 December 2023, reveal the EU pondering a strategic role in possibly reinforcing the legitimacy of the PA and positioning as a key actor in Gaza's "post-conflict" governance (Statewatch 2024). Although these remain preliminary considerations that, at the time of writing, have yet to materialise at the political decision-making level, without a reassessment of EU approaches and methods in Palestine (an *(un)learning* process), there is real risk of reproducing practices that would further entrench technical security initiatives disconnected from the realities and people on the ground.

As one respondent from Palestinian CSO in West Bank critically argued, prior and after the 7 October

> Democracy support under apparent colonial situations is an oxymoron. All forms of democratic support that are applied in other contexts are not applicable to Palestine because it is not a sovereign country, as there is essentially one regime that controls everything, and that is Israel. Meanwhile, in the West Bank and Gaza, there are forms of limited self-governance, but these are structurally incapable of creating a truly democratic system as they stand. (Interview 2)

This comment emphasises that the principles and premises for democracy – namely sovereignty and self-determination – are and continue to be fundamentally absent in the Palestinian context. These principles are often neglected in EU practices, largely due to Israel's ongoing occupation and settler colonial policies, which result as significant structural impediments to the realisation of democratic governance in Palestinian territories. This perspective aligns with an expert interviewee's observation that:

> The EU's emphasis keeps being always on stability, but it completely ignores the undemocratic realities of the situation. The EU continues focusing on the wrong thing as the reality is that the people in Palestine are not free to decide for themselves. If the EU wants to support democracy and democratic practices in other policy fields, such as security, it has to look at the basic precondition of sovereignty and the ability of people to control their own future. (Interview 1)

The EU's maintained focus on Israel's security perceptions also in the aftermath of 7 October, and its support for the PA and its security sector, has overshadowed efforts and needs to foster democratic change. Against this backdrop, the EU has imposed several restrictive measures on its practices in Palestine, particularly affecting Palestinian civil society (Interview 2). These include plans to introduce an anti-incitement clause in funding agreements, which will oblige Palestinian CSOs to pledge not to incite hatred. Additionally, European donors, citing unfounded concerns about aid diversion to Palestinian armed groups, have increased scrutiny over funding distribution and in some cases (e.g. by Germany) reduced or cut off support to certain organisations. These measures have created significant challenges for Palestinian civil society, forcing many groups to balance donor conditions with their locally owned missions (Tartir et al. 2025).

Conclusion

Integrating these reflections, the EU's foreign policy practices in Palestine are observed here as being characterised by a fundamental conundrum. On one level, the EU's interventions – through capacity-building, technical assistance and institutional support – are designed to foster an environment that could serve as the foundation for state building and democratic consolidation. On another level, however, the operational reality is that the measures in the policy sector of security and CSOs support have predominantly reinforced a security-first paradigm that privileges external stability over democratic transformation. This paradox is further complicated by the "fuzziness" and performative nature of the Palestinian quasi-state, which remains elusive, characterised by ambiguity and incompleteness in its institutions, governance and territorial sovereignty (Pace and Sen 2019, Pace 2022).

As Dana (2023) and Tartir (2018) argue, the EU's approach to democracy support in the Palestinian context is marked by contradictions. The rhetoric of liberal democracy and good governance stands in stark

contrast to the practices that have emerged from EU interventions – practices that are primarily geared toward professionalising a security apparatus that is unaccountable and externally oriented. Furthermore, the unintended consequences identified by Bouris (2019) reveal that EU-led state-building efforts have often reinforced existing power imbalances, thus contributing to the entrenchment of a status quo rather than catalysing transformative change.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is a governance model in which the promise of empowerment by the EU is undermined by a lack of local ownership, in which externally imposed technical reforms and conditionalities for CSOs are embedded in a framework that is indifferent to local realities, to grassroots democratic processes, and in which accountability is defined by the satisfaction of external strategic interests or perceptions rather than by responsiveness to the Palestinian people. The paradox may not be accidental but rooted in political considerations embedded in a logic of securitised and decontextualised state-building and democratic support practices – a logic that treats stability and control as both a means and an end, even when these comes at the expense of the rights of Palestinians to self-determination (Interviews 1, 2 and 3).

Moving forward, the EU should reassess its approach, shifting its focus on state-building and security as adopted and implemented thus far, to practices that foster the social empowerment, embeddedness and accountability of Palestinians, promote wide local ownership and prioritise the fulfilment of Palestinian rights to self-determination. In the crucial words of a respondent, "If the EU would adopt a rights-based approach centring Palestinians rights to self-determination instead of elite centred practices in the field of state-building, security or peace-building, that would change the realities on the ground" (Interview 2), signalling that a fundamental reframing of the EU's practices in Palestine – and thus a process of (un)learning – has yet to be initiated and is necessary to align the EU's democratic and foreign policy practices with the democratic aspirations of the Palestinian people.

List of interviews (online)

1. Interview with a representative of Palestinian CSO, July 2024
2. Interview with a Palestinian independent expert, July 2024
3. Interview with a representative of Palestinian CSO, September 2024

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8.
EU Security Practices
and Democracy Support in Tunisia

Akram Ezzamouri

Since the 2010-2011 revolution, Tunisia has held a unique position in the European Union's foreign policy framework to the Middle East and North Africa region. Hailed (once) as the success story of the local protest movements that interested the EU Southern neighbourhood, Tunisia became a focal point for EU democracy support, with substantial political, financial and technical support directed toward governance, reforms and civil society, and socio-economic stabilisation. The EU's engagement spanned multiple policy domains – ranging from trade and development assistance to migration management and security cooperation – each reflecting broader EU strategic interests in the region. However, while democracy support was central to the EU's early post-revolutionary approach, its policies in the long run, particularly in the security sector, have raised concerns regarding their alignment with democratic principles on the ground.

Following the 2011 revolution, the EU's engagement in Tunisia has been guided by other strategic frameworks, most notably the revised European Neighbourhood Policy (European Commission 2011), which sought to enhance cooperation between the EU and Tunisia, reinforcing democratic governance and economic resilience. Tunisia was designated as a "privileged partner", benefiting from increased financial and political support, alongside strengthened bilateral cooperation, aimed at linking political reform, governance, human rights and development with economic incentives. Financial assistance has played a pivotal role in EU-Tunisia relations. Between 2011 and 2013, the EU allocated approximately 278 million euros, with substantial funds directed toward judicial reforms and governance improvements. Additionally, civil society organisations received EU funding

through instruments such as the European Endowment for Democracy and the European Neighbourhood Instrument, strengthening local non-governmental actors (European Commission 2016).

In the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, the EU's engagement with Tunisia was largely driven by the need to adapt quickly to an unexpected transformative grassroot push. From 2011 to 2014, the EU prioritised support for democratisation, recalibrating its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) with a "more for more" approach – offering increased financial aid and market access in exchange for concrete political reforms (European Commission 2011). However, this focus gradually shifted back to immediate security concerns as European and Tunisian priorities converged on countering migration, transnational phenomena and threats, and radicalisation (Zardo and Cavatorta 2016, Narbone 2020). By 2014, increasing concerns among Tunisians about regional instability and domestic security threats deepened European anxieties over transnational risk, leading to a policy shift towards greater engagement with and reinforcement of Tunisia's security sector.

This chapter examines EU security-related practices in Tunisia and their alignment with democratic practices with a specific focus on the shifts that followed President Kaïs Saïed's self-coup on 25 July 2021. The event, which saw Saïed consolidate power by dissolving parliament and ruling by decree, marked a turning point in Tunisia's transformative and once democratic trajectory and tested the EU's commitment to democratic governance in its partnerships, especially when it comes to sectors where EU lays interests. Against this backdrop, the central research question guiding this study is: *To what extent have EU security-related practices in Tunisia upheld democratic principles, and how has the July 2021 turning point affected the EU's approach to security governance in the country?* The analysis assesses whether EU engagement has reinforced democratic security practices or whether it has contributed to the erosion of democratic norms by prioritising stability over practices entailing accountability and local ownership.

Building on the conceptual approach adopted by the SHAPEDEM-EU project (Gawrich et al. 2024, Achrainer and Pace 2024) and defined in the first chapter of this volume, this chapter explores the evolution of EU-Tunisia relations through the lens of democratic (un)learning – assessing whether EU policies have shifted towards and supported greater democratic accountability or whether they have retrenched into technical

approach that consolidates and condones the authoritarian practices of President Kaïs Saïed. Particularly, here I investigate whether the EU's practices in the field of security remain sensitive to local democratic aspirations or whether they are enablers of a democratic backsliding. By applying this framework, the study aims to provide a critical assessment of how the EU's security engagement has adapted – or failed to adapt – to Tunisia's shifting political landscape, offering insights into the broader implications for EU foreign policy in the Southern neighbourhood.

This chapter is based on data collected through interviews conducted between July and October 2024 with Tunisian and foreign researchers on Tunisia, Tunisian civil society representatives and EU officials. Drawing on these data, as well as grey and academic literature and primary sources on EU security and migration policies, it first outlines the conceptual framework by defining the democraticness of practices and examining their relevance in the context of domestic politics and EU actions, particularly in relation to Tunisia's turning point of July 2021. The chapter then analyses how the EU engaged with Tunisia in the field of security before and after this turning point, highlighting the democratic character of these practices and exploring the elements that can explain the EU's failure to (un)learn following Tunisia's authoritarian shift in 2021.

8.1 Conceptual definition of democraticness

To analyse the democratic nature of EU security practices in Tunisia, the conceptual framework employed here interrogates the intersection between EU security-related policies (in the field of security sector reform, security assistance and migration) and democracy as a practice. Drawing from the literature on EU foreign policy and democratic projection in the Southern neighbourhood (Khakee and Wolff 2022), the chapter examines EU security policies through three interrelated dimensions: social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability.

Social embeddedness refers here to the extent to whether EU security interventions are integrated into Tunisia's local political and social contexts. This dimension questions whether EU practices are responsive to Tunisia's evolving political landscape, including the role of civil society, wider political stakeholders and affected communities. In light of Saïed's authoritarian consolidation, assessing social embeddedness means inquiring whether the EU's security support aligns with democratic principles or whether it strengthens coercive state structures that suppress dissent.

Closely linked to this, *social empowerment* examines whether EU security practices enhance the agency and ownership of local actors, including civil society organisations, grassroots movements and democratic institutions. This dimension interrogates whether EU security-related practices in Tunisia create spaces for democratic participation or whether it marginalises local actors in favour of a state-security-centred approach. Given Tunisia's current political crisis, assessing social empowerment means analysing whether and how, following the July 2021 turning point, the EU has recalibrated its security-related practices to support democratic forces or whether it has maintained or strengthened its partnerships with increasingly authoritarian state institutions.

Finally, *social accountability* assesses whether EU security interventions are subject to oversight and local scrutiny. This includes examining the transparency of EU-funded security initiatives, the extent of civil society involvement in monitoring their implementation, and the mechanisms available for oversight and contestation. As Tunisia's political space becomes increasingly restricted, understanding whether the EU has adapted its behavioural practices to address democratic backsliding – or whether it continues to operate without meaningful (un)learning – is critical to evaluating the democratic quality of its external engagements and foreign policy practices in Tunisia.

8.2 July 2021 and Tunisia's critical juncture

The 25 July 2021 self-coup by Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed is approached here as a significant turning point, with the country's departure from the decade-long process of political transition and democratic consolidation. Saïed's dismissal of the Prime minister, suspension of Parliament, and subsequent consolidation of power signified a shift towards democratic backsliding. The policies Saïed implemented following this turning point facilitated the centralisation of power, which can be understood as a consequence of an incomplete democratic transition and the structural weaknesses of intermediary institutions from 2011 on (Sadiki and Saleh 2023).

Saïed's justification for his actions was rooted in Article 80 of the 2014 Tunisian Constitution, which allows the president to take exceptional measures in the event of an imminent threat to national security. However, his interpretation of this provision was contested, as the lack of a functioning Constitutional Court – a crucial element of Tunisia's transitionnal democratic framework – meant there was no judicial body to

assess the legality of his actions (International Commission of Jurists 2022). The absence of such an institution exemplifies the incomplete nature of Tunisia's transition, leaving the Tunisian political system vulnerable to unilateral decision-making. This legal vacuum enabled Saïed to rule by decree, bypassing checks and balances and rendering legislative oversight ineffective.

Following the initial power grab, Saïed pursued policies that entrenched his authority, systematically dismantling democratic institutions and weakening political intermediaries. One of his first major moves was the suspension and later dissolution of Parliament, which removed a key counterbalance to presidential authority. By sidelining the legislative branch, Saïed was able to govern without parliamentary scrutiny, further concentrating power in the executive. Additionally, in February 2022, he dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council, an independent body responsible for overseeing the judiciary, replacing it with a provisional structure under his direct control – meaning effectively eroding judicial independence, allowing Saïed to influence legal proceedings and eliminate opposition through legal means (Arab Reform Initiative 2024).

The centralisation of power was further reinforced by the constitutional referendum held in July 2022, which resulted in the adoption of a new constitution that significantly expanded presidential prerogatives. The new legal framework diminished the role of Parliament, restricted judicial independence and abolished key oversight mechanisms, effectively institutionalising hyper-presidentialism (Nafti 2024). Under this system, the president gained unchecked authority over executive and legislative functions, a stark departure from the power-sharing arrangements established during the political transition. The referendum, however, saw low voter turnout, indicating a lack of broad societal consensus on the legitimacy of the new constitutional order.

Saïed's policies also targeted political parties and civil society organisations, both of which play critical intermediary roles in Tunisia's democratic parenthesis. Political parties, particularly those that had been dominant in post-2011 Tunisia, such as Ennahda, were subjected to repression, with several of their leaders arrested or investigated on charges of corruption and conspiracy. Similarly, restrictions on civil society organisations, including restrictions on foreign funding and increased state oversight, weakened their ability to mobilise resistance or safely advocate for democratic principles (Benghazi 2023).

The economic and social context also played a crucial role in enabling Saïed's consolidation of power. The years leading up to the July 2021 turning point were marked by economic stagnation, high unemployment and widespread disillusionment with political elites (Meddeb 2022). Successive coalition governments had failed to address Tunisia's structural economic issues, leading to a decline in public trust in democratic institutions. Saïed capitalised on this frustration, presenting himself as a populist figure committed to rooting out corruption and restoring national sovereignty. His narrative resonated with a significant portion of the population, who viewed political parties as self-interested and ineffective. This erosion of public confidence in traditional political intermediaries created a political vacuum that facilitated Saïed's unilateral governance. Marked by structural deficiencies, Tunisia's incomplete democratic transition created the structural conditions that enabled the materialisation of Saïed's authoritarian turn. The failure to establish a Constitutional Court, the fragmentation of political parties and the inability to implement effective reforms on economy, justice and security all contributed to the vulnerabilities that Saïed exploited. Moreover, the reliance on consensus politics in the post-2011 period, while initially seen as a strength, ultimately led to reforms paralysis and institutional inefficiency, further eroding public confidence in democratic practices.

Against this backdrop, the following paragraphs aim to first evaluate how the EU engaged with the Tunisian context by examining the elements that characterised the country's transition, as well as to understand, in terms of democraticness, whether and how the EU's security-related practices in Tunisia have undergone a recalibration following the July 2021 coup.

8.3 From democratic security reform to security assistance

The EU's engagement with Tunisia after 2011 presents a complex case study in assessing the democratic nature of security-related practices regarding security sector reform, security assistance and migration.

For context, EU-Tunisia relations emerged under Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali within a framework of economic and political partnership. The 1995 Association Agreement between the EU and Tunisia set the stage for cooperation that was initially centred on economic development and trade (European Union and Tunisia 1995). The launch

of the European Neighbourhood Policy in the early 2000s marked another step in EU-Tunisia relations. Cooperation in the field of security became more systematic, with the 2004 ENP Action Plan introducing a dedicated chapter on cooperation on justice and home affairs. The plan sought to build the capacity of Tunisian security institutions through targeted programmes such as AENEAS for migration, and bilateral police and judicial cooperation initiatives (Zardo and Cavatorta 2016).

By formalising these channels in security-related initiatives, the EU institutionalised its approach to Tunisia, embedding a network of contacts and negotiations that primarily involved senior officials from the Tunisian Ministry of Interior and other security actors. As discussed later, the European reliance on this structure, rooted in networks established during the Ben Ali regime, will be revealed as the primary reason for prioritising "stability" over significant reform, with critics arguing that this approach both reinforced authoritarian practices and hindered the potential for democratic renewal.

The focus of EU interventions in Tunisia's security landscape has been, at first, on reforming and supporting the security apparatus, particularly under the Ministry of the Interior, which has not only survived the fall of the Ben Ali regime but also managed to carve out an increasingly autonomous sphere of influence since 2011. This "resilience" of the security sector, especially through the emergence and strengthening of police unions and due to contextual rising threats related to domestic and regional security, has created a paradox. At the outset of the revolution, Tunisia aimed to reform its security sector in a democratic manner, and it sought the EU's assistance. In 2013, a peer review process, conducted by twelve security experts from EU member states, was launched by the EU in collaboration with the Tunisian authorities to assess Tunisia's security apparatus. While this process marked a first positive step towards democratic reform, it also highlighted the central issue of the securitisation of Tunisia's transitional political agenda, which increasingly undermined democratic aspirations. The EU's initial support for security sector reform in Tunisia, based on the conclusions of the inaugural political dialogue on security and counterterrorism in Tunis in September 2015 (EEAS 2015), and the launch of a 23-million-euro programme for security sector modernisation (PARMSS) in November 2015, sought to enhance the country's security apparatus, border control and counter-terrorism efforts. In practice PARMSS prioritised aligning internal security forces with interna-

tional standards on oversight, training and human rights, and enhancing their land border control capacities (Peinaud 2019). Yet, despite the stated goal of promoting democratic practices, respect for human rights and the rule of law in the sector – and against the backdrop of a stalled transition and the slow adoption of radical reforms in post-revolution Tunisia – these efforts ended reinforcing state power than facilitating transformation (Interview 3).

The growing influence of police unions in Tunisia, coupled with democracy resistance from the old guard, significantly hindered domestic and external reform efforts, as these local stakeholders became a powerful force within the Ministry of the Interior. Following the 2011 revolution, these newly formed unions were seen as crucial for protecting the interests of the police force in the changing political environment (Pluta 2023). However, their influence expanded to such an extent that by 2015, the Ministry of the Interior no longer demonstrated any commitment to security sector reform, leading to a situation in which the EU's security policies, even when aiming at involving local CSOs actors (EEAS 2017), became embedded in a structure that resisted democratic change. This, among other things, undermined the EU's broader objectives of supporting the political transition and local democratic practices, and ultimately caused international support for this sector to shift from promoting security sector reform to prioritising security assistance (Interview 3).

8.3.1 EU democraticness in the context of Tunisia's flawed transition

Although democracy support was an explicit priority, the EU's commitment to advancing democratic reforms was tempered also by the renewed imperatives of regional stability and migration control. The 2013 political assassinations of prominent Tunisian politicians Choukri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, the 2015 terrorist attacks in Tunis and Sousse, and the contextually rising prominence of migration in the EU political agenda, triggered a shift toward a more security-driven engagement, leading to a reorientation of EU policies towards counterterrorism and border security. This shift also reflects broader contextual transformations in the EU's self-representation on the international stage, particularly in its Southern neighbourhood, with the introduction of the 2016 EU Global Strategy and the concept of "principled pragmatism" (EEAS 2016). Scholars such as Assem Dandashly (2018) highlight the tension between the EU's nor-

mative commitment to democracy support and its realpolitik security concerns, with the Global Strategy marking a recognition of the limitations of the EU's transformative power and emphasis on stability and resilience over direct democratic transformation. Along this logic, in Tunisia while EU continued to support reforms, it increasingly framed these efforts within the broader context of security, prioritising stability over deep democratisation.

Therefore, the EU's renewed engagement with Tunisia has been situated within a broader security-stability nexus, emphasising the EU's dual objective of supporting democratic practices while ensuring regional stability and security, with a particular focus on counterterrorism, migration management and regional stabilisation. This approach was reflected in key bilateral engagements, including the 2014 Mobility Partnership, which offered visa facilitation for select groups such as Tunisian students and businesspeople, in exchange for Tunisia's commitment to readmitting irregular migrant people reaching the EU (European Commission 2014). All at the same time, the EU has also provided significant financial and technical assistance to Tunisia's security sector, focusing on border security, intelligence sharing and counterterrorism training. These efforts, however, have reinforced pre-existing patronage networks that were associated with the previous regime. The continuity of institutional frameworks from the Ben Ali era in post-2011 Tunisia has led to concerns over the lack of transparency and social accountability in security sector reform, with civil society organisations questioning the degree to which EU-funded initiatives genuinely contributed to democratic oversight (Interview 2; Terre Solidaire 2024).

Another significant concern with the EU's security-related practices in Tunisia has been the gap between the formal objectives of support to reform and the changing priorities and transitioning political reality on the ground. Initially, Tunisia's post-revolutionary government sought European support to align with democratic norms. However, progress has been slow, as evidenced by the ten-years delay in finalising the code of conduct for the country's security forces under the PARMSS (Tunisia 2023), highlighting a broader trend in which the Tunisian security sector and executive, rather than integrating into a democratic framework or reform-driven context, has largely resisted meaningful change. Against this backdrop, the EU's limited interventions in support of security sector reform ultimately prioritised state-centred security practices over broader

democratic empowerment. The absence of robust oversight mechanisms allowed security sector reforms and assistance to modernise infrastructure, such as border surveillance and intelligence systems, without ensuring transparency or social accountability. This, in turn, empowered entrenched state actors, who resisted substantive democratisation and hindered wider social empowerment. As a result, rather than fostering a more democratic and socially embedded security apparatus, EU interventions contributed to the (unintended) consequence of securitisation of Tunisian politics, shifting the focus away from essential reforms that were deemed crucial for the country's democratic transition.

In terms of democraticness, the EU's security-related practices in Tunisia, particularly in supporting reforms, highlight a critical disconnect between external support and democratisation. The EU aim to support democratic governance and reform has been hindered by the dynamics of Tunisia's transition, which featured characteristics of democracy resistance. The failure to address the obstructive role of local stakeholders and the lack of robust oversight mechanisms weakened the democratic quality and impact of its interventions. By reinforcing existing power structures, the EU's approach ultimately unintendedly contributed to the persistence of undemocratic frameworks and practices at the local level.

8.4 Assessing EU (un)learning in Tunisia

In front of Tunisia's trajectory post-2021, the EU initially framed its approach to Tunisia's democratic regression within the context of upholding fundamental rights and the rule of law. However, despite initial statements by EU High Representative Josep Borrell calling for the maintenance of Tunisia's commitment to democratic practices (HR/VP 2021), the EU ultimately adopted a cautious wait-and-see approach. The political crisis that unfolded following Saïed's consolidation of power garnered significant popular support among Tunisians, leading the EU to temper its criticism and avoid any policy intervention. However, as the situation evolved, the EU's and EU member states' concerns about democratic backsliding were increasingly overshadowed by security-related issues, particularly on migration.

The resurgence of migration as a central concern in EU-Tunisia relations became particularly evident in 2023, with a sharp increase in irregular departures from Tunisia to Italy, amid a tense environment for Sub-

Saharan migrant people in Tunisia, following xenophobic statements by President Saïed echoing "great replacement" theories. This shift in the EU's focus was driven by the broader political agenda of EU member states, particularly Italy, where controlling migration flows became a priority. According to UNHCR data, Tunisia surpassed Libya as the primary departure point for migrants crossing the Mediterranean, with nearly 157,000 sea arrivals in Italy from Tunisia in the 2023 (UNHCR 2024).

Under the leadership of Prime minister Giorgia Meloni, the Italian government spearheaded diplomatic efforts in fostering renewed engagement between the EU and Saïed's Tunisia, advocating for pragmatic solutions that prioritised migration control over political conditionality. The outcome was the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in July 2023 which outlined a framework for cooperation in migration management, economic support and energy partnership. The financial package worth 1 billion euros, included an immediate 150 million euros in budgetary aid and 105 million euros dedicated to migration management. The remainder of the package left conditioned to the signature of an IMF deal, which President Saïed rejected, describing it as "diktats". However, the broader EU-Tunisia engagement in border management extends beyond this recent 105 million contribution and is rooted in a series of sustained financial commitments. From 2018 to 2022, the EU allocated 73 million euro to Tunisia's border security, primarily through the EU Trust Fund for Africa and Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument-Global Europe. Under the NDICI-Global Europe framework (2021-2027), the EU has reinforced its commitment through the Multi-Country Migration Programme for the Southern Neighbourhood, ensuring continuity of prior initiatives (Casajuana and Pintus 2023, European Commission 2023).

While President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen hailed the EU-Tunisia MoU as a blueprint for the future engagement with the Southern neighbourhood, the agreement has faced substantial contestation within the EU. High Representative Josep Borell expressed concerns about the exclusion of all EU member states and the European Council from the design and negotiation of the document (O'Carroll 2023). Members of the European Parliament and human rights organisations voiced their objections, arguing that the EU's financial support could be seen as legitimising and supporting President Saïed's authoritarian rule while failing to address ongoing human rights abuses (Tineke and

Robbesom 2024). In line with these concerns, the EU Ombudsman also raised questions regarding the human rights situation and the procedure, requesting clarifications on whether the European Commission conducted a human rights impact assessment prior to the signing of the MoU (European Ombudsman 2024). Reports of mistreatment and deportations of black African migrant people in Tunisia's desert areas during the 2023 summer further complicated the EU's position, as human rights organisations and observers accused Tunis of abuses and violence and the EU of complicity (ECRE 2023).

The EU's engagement with Tunisia following the July-2021 critical juncture shows continuities in terms of deficiencies of democraticness of EU security-related practices and underscores a broader dilemma in European foreign policy: the tension between short-term interests and democratic practices and reforms.

While the EU had previously positioned itself as a normative power advocating for democratic transition, its policy towards Tunisia post-2021 reflected a further shift towards realpolitik. This was particularly supported by EU member states like Italy, which had more immediate stakes in the immediate fate of Tunisia and by the von der Leyen Commission's broader ambition for the EU to act as a geopolitical actor internationally, especially in the Mediterranean. The prioritisation of migration control and economic stabilisation over democratic practices marked a significant departure from the EU's earlier emphasis on principles. This trend is not unique to Tunisia; it reflects an EU's broader strategy in the Southern neighbourhood, where concerns about security and migration often outweigh democracy-related considerations.

The European Union's response to the 2021 turning point, particularly in security-related practices, has been characterised by a lack of (un)learning, with pragmatism taking precedence. The EU's engagement with Tunisia, particularly through migration and security cooperation, has revealed significant contradictions between its stated democratic values and its operational strategies. Rather than fostering democratic governance, the EU has increasingly prioritised border control and stability, often at the expense of transparency and human rights considerations. A key indicator of this shift is the limited space for political opposition and civil society engagement in Tunisia, which has deteriorated significantly since 2021. As one Tunisian expert noted, "civic space is shrinking (and) the centralisation of power is having a profound impact on the social

fabric, leading to economic stagnation, reinforcing violations against migrants and paralysing decision-making and reform processes, even within ministries" (Interview 3). This political reality has not, however, deterred the EU from deepening its engagement with Tunisian authorities, often without fully behaviourally considering the consequences for democratic governance.

One of the most striking failures in democratic (un)learning has been the EU's opacity in its dealings with Tunisia, particularly regarding the July 2023 MoU. While migration control remains a priority, information about agreements between Tunisia and the EU and EU member states is often not directly disclosed to the Tunisian public, leading to an information gap that undermines both social accountability and empowerment. Tunisians often don't learn about the details of agreements through local media but rather from non-governmental organisations or opposition groups, or European media, creating a gap in information, highlighting a broader issue of non-transparent decision-making that excludes local stakeholders from critical discussions, thus missing to guarantee social embeddedness and accountability (Interviews 2, 3 and 4). This lack of transparency has fuelled scepticism towards European engagement, reinforcing perceptions of external interference rather than partnership. Moreover, this information asymmetry is not merely a failure of communication but reflects a broader practice in which European institutions, adapting to the new Tunisia political context post-2021, primarily engage with executive authorities while bypassing wider consultations with both local and European civil society organisations.

At the member-state level, divergent national interests have further complicated the EU's approach to Tunisia. Italy, in particular, has been a leading force in shaping the recent EU-Tunisia migration partnership, driven by its domestic political priorities rather than a coherent European strategy. While Meloni is seen as having been able at mobilising Europe not only for Italian interests but also for broader European ones, reinforcing a pragmatic rather than values-based approach, the EU practices to Tunisia appear contradictory and fragmented. This divergence has contributed to a reactive rather than strategic European approach, where short-term goals are shaped by external pressure rather than a commitment to democratic practices in foreign policy. However, recent reports of abuses committed by Tunisian security forces against migrant people have triggered a discussion regarding a possible reassessment of the EU's

policies with the European Commission indicating a potential shift towards incorporating human rights conditions into future funding agreements, suggesting a belated recognition of the need to align security-related cooperation with human rights commitments (Townsend 2025). While these proposals signal an acknowledgement of past malpractices, their adoption and implementation remains uncertain.

Conclusion

While the EU initially positioned itself as a normative actor supporting democratic transition, its approach increasingly adapted to the constraints of Tunisia's limited and inconsistent reform process, as well as to the growing influence of internal EU dynamics and member state interests, particularly those related to migration. What becomes evident through this analysis is that the challenges confronting EU-Tunisia security cooperation and the shortcomings in advancing democratic reform were not solely triggered by the 2021 self-coup but had been gradually unfolding well before this political rupture. These dynamics, entrenched authoritarian legacies within Tunisia's security apparatus and the EU's own evolving priorities collectively set the stage for a gradual erosion of the initial joint democratic agenda. The political crisis and Saïed's consolidation of power functioned more as an accelerant than as an origin point for this deterioration.

In sum, despite some recognition of human rights concerns by the European Commission, the EU's approach to Tunisia remains largely focused on safeguarding immediate interests, particularly migration control, at the expense of local and European democratic practices. The shift towards high-level political engagement with Tunisian authorities, as evidenced by the EU-Tunisia MoU, has further reduced opportunities for consistent operational cooperation and democratic dialogue, thus narrowing the space for socially embedded and accountable processes and for civil society and independent institutions in shaping Tunisia's democratic future.

To conclude, it's true that the EU's engagement with Tunisia exposes a critical dilemma: the contrast between goals of democracy support and the practices of realpolitik shaped by security and migration concerns. This case illustrates how EU foreign policy learning can be path-dependent and susceptible to external pressures if not socially embedded and accountable, resulting in policy trajectories that privilege state-stability

over long-term democratic reform and practices. Understanding this shift is essential for rethinking how the EU can reconcile its normative ambitions with its practices responding to security concerns in its future neighbourhood policies.

List of interviews

1. Interview with a Tunisian expert (online), September 2024
2. Interview with a representative of Tunisian CSO (online), September 2024
3. Confidential discussion with a Tunisian expert, October 2024
4. Confidential discussion with a Tunisian expert, October 2024

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9.

Between Security and Democracy Support: The EU's Evolving Foreign Policy Engagement with Armenia

*Anastasiia Kudlenko, Alexandra Sabou
and Aijan Sharshenova,
with contribution from Antonella Aloia*

The European Union is a unique foreign policy actor and a composite democracy (Héritier 2003). On the surface, democratic norms and principles are key in the EU's engagement with its international partners. The EU incorporates its norms and values into its foreign policy documents. Democracy support is particularly important in the EU's relations with its immediate geographic neighbourhood. Nonetheless, the EU's Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods, which share land and sea borders with the EU, have struggled on their democratisation journeys.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), a framework document, which guides the EU's relations with its geographic neighbours, has celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2024. Following the review in 2015, the EU has shifted its policies in the Neighbourhoods more towards security and stability rather than democracy and normative principles (Blockmans 2017).

Two regional components constitute the ENP: the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), and the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which was introduced in 2009. The Eastern Partnership focuses on the Eastern neighbourhood: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. This chapter focuses on the EU's relations with Armenia within the framework of the Eastern neighbourhood through the prism of its foreign policy practices and democracy support aspirations. It also takes a closer look at EU security support to the country.

The chapter aims to assess the democratic nature of EU practices in its foreign policy and security engagement with Armenia, as one of the EaP countries. Its objective is to understand the EU's ability, capacity and willingness to learn new lessons and un-learn past inefficient practices. To this end, we rely on the following research questions to guide the analysis: What are historical turning points that have affected the EU's behavioural practices in its cooperation with Armenia overall and the security component of this cooperation in particular? Which role does democracy as a practice play in EU engagement with Armenia's security policies, which absences and presences in terms of social embeddedness, social empowerment, social accountability can we observe? How can the EU learn to practice a more efficient and engaging democracy support in Armenia and its Eastern neighbourhood?

This chapter is based on both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources include policy and academic publications on EU democracy support in the Eastern neighbourhood and, more specifically, in Armenia. Primary sources include original interviews with policy makers and civil society representatives in Armenia and relevant policy documents and official statements by EU and Armenian institutions and officials. The five interviews were conducted online and focused on the civil society's perspectives of EU democracy support and the democratic nature of EU engagement with Armenia (see list of interviews). The interviews were conducted in September 2024 via Zoom platform by the EaP Civil Society Forum (CSF) and the University of Warwick staff. All participants were informed about the purposes of the data collection and had an opportunity to read an information leaflet, as well as ask questions. For ethical considerations, all interviews are anonymised.

Some limitations of the research should be mentioned. First, the analysis focuses on the last decade, from 2013 to 2023. Some important developments took place in 2024 and early 2025, so the discussion will at times extend to a more recent timeframe. Second, this study focuses on Armenia only. Third, we concentrate on behavioural changes and patterns of the EU in Armenia, with the focus on security cooperation with the country and assessing the democratic nature of EU policies.

The chapter proceeds as follows: first, we provide an overview of the conceptual framework underpinning the analysis and explain how democratic nature or democratic-ness of EU foreign policy engagement is assessed; second, we identify and analyse historic turning points in EU-

Armenia relations and study whether they had any impact on the practices of EU engagement with Armenia and its security sector, third, we identify lessons (un)learned by the EU.

9.1 Assessing democratic nature of EU foreign policy practices

The EU-Armenia relations are an evolving partnership defined by complex (geo)political and economic dynamics. This partnership has been developing within a broader geopolitical context shaped by Armenia's historical, security and economic ties with Russia, its historical antagonism and geographical proximity with Turkey, its conflictual relation with neighbouring Azerbaijan, and its evolving aspirations for deeper integration with the EU. These aspirations have been boosted by Armenia's recent introduction of a landmark draft bill in January 2025 to initiate the country's EU accession process, a move applauded by Brussels (Gasparyan 2025) and mocked by Moscow (Barseghyan 2025).

Building on the conceptual framework outlined in chapter 1 we study the evolution of EU-Armenia relations through the lens of democratic (un)learning to assess whether EU policies can be characterised by greater inclusivity and democratic accountability or whether they have remained inflexible and elite-driven (Gawrich et al. 2024). Here, the focus is on the democratic nature or democraticness of EU foreign policy practices in Armenia and specifically its security dimensions. To understand what is meant by democraticness, we use three interrelated concepts: social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability.

Social embeddedness is based on the idea that a core element of democracy is meaningful participation (Achrainer and Pace 2024). EU foreign policy practices therefore should include not just governmental actors and traditional civil society organisations, but all communities, affected by the issues. This means that in the Armenian case, we are studying whether and how the EU engages with the local security context, affected by the Nagorno Karabakh wars and the peace process that followed Azerbaijan's lightning offensive in September 2023.

Social empowerment is about taking into account the local knowledge and utilising it to enhance the agency and ownership of local actors, involved in security-related cooperation with the EU. Here, the question is whether the EU creates space for non-state actors in Armenia to become active participants in joint action.

Finally, *social accountability* presupposes that those affected by EU foreign policy action, i.e. not external policymakers or experts in charge of devising this action, are given a chance to participate in its evaluation and assessment. In other words, is there an oversight and local scrutiny of EU engagement with Armenia's security sector?

Over the past decade, EU-Armenia relations have experienced important ups and downs stemming from shifting geopolitical dynamics and alliances, Armenia's internal political changes, and numerous security threats. The next section presents the key historic turning points that marked these relations, touching upon Armenia's political decisions, EU's diplomatic responses, and the actions and reactions of regional actors, namely Russia and Azerbaijan. The analysis of this dynamic tandem in EU-Armenia relations offers insights into the broader challenges of EU foreign policy in the EaP region, especially in the context of competing security alliances and economic interests.

9.2 Historic turning points in the EU-Armenia relations 2013-2023 and potential moments of epiphany

9.2.1 Historic turning points

The EU-Armenia relations have gone through a political rollercoaster in the last decade and have demonstrated an unprecedented dynamic change. Armenia's relations with the EU and other international actors are increasingly informed by the security concerns and its long-standing conflict with the neighbouring Azerbaijan. In the hierarchy of the EU external bilateral relationships, Armenia might not take the top priority tier, but it certainly is not the last one in terms of strategic importance. Armenia is an integral part of the ENP and a part to the EaP (EEAS 2021).

This chapter focuses on historic turning points, which can be defined as path-altering events and critical junctures in the history of the contemporary EU-Armenian relations. Based on an analysis of what could be defined as historic turning points of the EU's democracy-related engagement in Armenia in the last decade, we assess the democratic nature of EU support in the context of security cooperation with the country.

In November 2013 at a summit in Vilnius, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine were scheduled to sign the new Association Agreement (AA) with the EU. But two months before, the Armenian government, under the

leadership of the then President Serzh Sargsyan, abruptly ended talks with the EU and committed itself to join the Eurasian Economic Union, a Russia-led regional initiative. The negotiations of a new agreement, without free trade clause, have been rekindled in 2015 and completed in 2017 with signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

Marked by some as a 'war of opportunity', the 2020 war between Azerbaijan and Armenia resulted in a geopolitical shift in South Caucasus, culminated by Azerbaijan's takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. Russia as a main security guarantor for Armenia played an insignificant role in a peace process. Many stakeholders in Armenia felt betrayed by Russia, which resulted to yet another shift in the country's foreign policy – towards the EU. Further, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Russia's failure to provide military alliance commitments under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) have weakened the credibility of its security guarantees to Armenia, and its enormous losses make it impossible for it to react to any other major contingency.

Meanwhile, the EU acknowledges the importance of security dimension as one of the top three joint priorities for cooperation, along with economic development for stabilisation, and migration and mobility. The EU's Joint Communication on the Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020 outlines the long-term policy objectives for future cooperation with Eastern neighbourhood partners (European Commission 2020).

Below, we analyse these historical points to better understand EU-Armenia relations and the role of democratic practices within in. All these developments need to be considered against the background of the ongoing autocratisation of the South Caucasus region and the interplay of Russian and EU interests in the region.

9.2.2 The 2013 turn towards the EAEU

In 2013 the European Union and Armenia were on the verge of signing an Association Agreement (AA) that included a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) at the EaP Vilnius Summit. After four years of intense negotiations (Perchoc 2018), the agreement was expected to pave the way for Armenia's rapprochement with the EU. However, in a surprising turn of events, now former Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan announced that Armenia would instead join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), halting the AA process.

This sudden shift, prompted by Russia's use of coercion and military-economic intimidation vis-a-vis Yerevan (Abrahamyan 2015), was presented by the latter as a strategic decision driven largely by security concerns. As a landlocked country with a long-standing 30-year conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and complex relations with neighbouring Turkey, Armenia continued to consider Russia a critical security partner and guarantor. The country's military dependence on Russia, particularly in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, was a decisive factor in this 'U-turn'. Additionally, Armenia feared the loss of Russian security guarantees and the potential for political isolation if it moved away from Russia's orbit.

The EU was taken by surprise with this turn of events. At the time, it barely played any tangible role in Armenia's security and had a poor understanding on the country's dependence on Russia. As one of our interviewees put it, "The EU miscalculated Armenia's dependence on Russia and what steps to take to limit this dependence so that those overnight shifts in Armenian foreign policy would not happen" (Interview 2).

The EU therefore underestimated Armenia's deep economic and security dependence on Russia and failed to adequately address this challenge in its diplomatic approach. This was partly because the bloc *failed to use the negotiation process as a potential leverage for the promotion of democratic reforms in the country*. Instead, it largely treated the partnership as a straightforward economic and political alignment, disregarding Armenia's complex security calculus. In this circumstances, social empowerment and social accountability were glaringly omitted from the process of AA negotiation, while social embeddedness was extremely limited, with the EU focusing on Armenian political elites and a handful of large civil society organisations.

Armenia's decision to forgo the AA with the EU and instead join the Russian-led EAEU had long-term implications, both internally and externally. Domestically, Armenia's shift meant the loss of a crucial opportunity to address its democratic deficit. From a foreign policy perspective, halting the AA may have affected the relations with neighbouring Turkey. With an AA in place, the EU would have been in the position to leverage the DCFTA as a way to pressure Turkey to open the long-closed border with Armenia (Shirinyan 2019).

9.2.3 From CEPA to Velvet Revolution

Following its turn towards the EAEU, Armenia's relationship with the EU entered a period of 'strategic pause'. However, in October 2014, Armenia began to re-engage with the EU, initiating a 'scoping exercise' to identify areas for future cooperation. This marked the beginning of the process that would lead to the elaboration, negotiation and signature of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement in 2017.

CEPA, though less ambitious than the initially negotiated AA, reflected both Armenia's constraints due to its EAEU membership and *the EU's more flexible, tailored approach under the revised ENP*. The agreement emphasised cooperation in areas such as political dialogue, justice, freedom, security, and sectoral cooperation in fields like transport, energy, and agriculture. Despite the limitations imposed by Armenia's EAEU and CSTO commitments, the CEPA provided a platform for continued EU-Armenia collaboration, reinforcing the importance of maintaining ties with the EU while managing Armenia's Russian alliance (Gasparyan 2017). Still, the EU preferred to compartmentalise its approach to the country, without putting any additional pressure on its democratisation. This would have been futile as Armenia's pivot towards Russia in 2013 paved the way for consistent efforts to reach some degree of authoritarianism (Abrahamyan 2015).

The 2018 Velvet Revolution offered the opportunity for a genuine political shift within Armenia. The non-violent overthrow of Serzh Sargsyan, who tried to cling on to power after two terms as President by becoming the country's Prime Minister, and the ascent to power of opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan was a key moment in the Armenian politics (Giragosian 2019). However, unlike the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, the Velvet Revolution did not result in a drastic shift in Armenia's foreign policy orientation. Despite the strong public support for democratic reforms, endorsed by a vibrant civil society, Pashinyan's government maintained Armenia's geopolitical orientation, to some extent reassuring Russia of Armenia's loyalty and performing a balancing act in relation with the EU and Western partners. Armenia remained pushed and pulled between two normative systems, which was especially visible in the regulation of civil society: Western/EU system encouraged support of the nongovernmental sector, while the Russian system promoted the so called 'foreign agents' laws', significantly limiting and impeding the civil society's role (Gilbert 2020).

Despite this continuity in foreign policy and steadiness in the Armenian-Russian relations, the EU's role in supporting Armenia's democratisation efforts grew significantly post-revolution. In this new political context, EU provided more robust support for democratic reforms, as the new government enjoyed unprecedented levels of public legitimacy and support (Shirinyan 2019).

After entering into force in March 2021, CEPA also led to the establishment of institutional structures for cooperation, namely the EU-Armenia Partnership Council, the Parliamentary Partnership Committee and the EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform. Over time, there was a joint commitment of the EU, the Armenian government and civil society to work towards strengthening the rule of law, democracy and human rights protection (Interview 3). Moreover, currently, as part of the 2021-2027 roadmap for EU engagement with civil society (EEAS 2022), the EU encouraged a bottom-up approach to Armenia's democratisation by engaging with civil society and including its active contribution to the reform process (EEAS 2023).

Thus, the Velvet Revolution allowed the EU to *expand the social embeddedness of its practices* in the country. While previously the bloc was predominantly focusing on the top-down approach and engaging with the elites and a handful of civil society organisations (CSOs), following the revolution, many more local actors, both from state and non-state sectors started actively engaging with Brussels. The government, led by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, has been a driving force behind deepening ties with the EU. Since 2018, the administration has viewed the EU as a key partner for reform and modernisation (Armenia 2023).

The National Assembly, Armenia's parliament, plays a crucial role in ratifying agreements and aligning domestic legislation with CEPA's provisions. It also serves as a platform for mediating domestic political contestations that influence foreign policy decisions. Moreover, several ministries, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Justice, are instrumental in implementing EU-supported reforms. For instance, the Ministry of Justice collaborates closely with EU partners to strengthen the judiciary and combat corruption, while the Ministry of Economy fosters economic partnerships with European counterparts.

Armenia has a vibrant civil society that acts as a bridge between local communities and the EU. One of the most funded sectors of EU democracy support, second only to the justice reform process (Grigoryan 2019), CSOs that have championed human rights, environmental protection, and

democratic accountability have long cherished EU financial support. Civil society networks such as the EU's Civil Society Facility and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (including its EaP CSF Armenian National Platform) *empower the diverse civil society sector* through funding and capacity-building opportunities, ensuring that civil society remains a key stakeholder and equal interlocutor in EU-Armenia relations. This also creates opportunities for *improved social accountability* of EU foreign policy action in Armenia as more CSOs monitor its activities in the country and voice their concerns when there is disconnect between the rhetoric and action from Brussels. At the same time, the situation is much more complex in the *security sector*.

Until 2020, when the renewed outbreak of conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorny Karabakh eroded the basis of the Russian-Armenian security compact, the EU remained largely on the sidelines of Armenia's security policies (De Waal 2024a). The Russian grip over Armenia's security has long history and will be very difficult to dismantle. Armenia formally agreed a military alliance with Russia in 1996, and its dependence only increased in the Putin era, with memberships in the Moscow-led military pact, the CSTO in 2002 and the EAEU in 2014 (De Waal 2024a). Still, it was not until 2023, when Brussels got involved in brokering a peace deal that its engagement in Armenia's security became significant.

9.2.4 The shift in Armenian's foreign policy: Pivoting towards the EU

Following the 2020 44-day war and Azerbaijan's 2023 military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh (Dumoulin and Gressel 2023) and given Russia's increasing focus on its own security challenges, particularly in the context of the war of aggression against Ukraine, under Pashinyan's leadership several steps were taken towards the diversification of Armenia's foreign policy options. The EU, once seen as a rather peripheral player in the South Caucasus' security field, began to gain traction as a more reliable actor in peacebuilding and diplomacy (EU Neighbours East 2021). This was first visible in the EU's engagement in the peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The fact that the leaders of these two countries accepted the EU's hand of peace, and its mediation role, is due to three factors. First, he President of the European Council, Charles Michel managed to secure their trust during his visit to the region in summer 2021; second, the timing was right – Azerbaijan Aliyev and Armenia's Pashinyan were keen to minimise

the Russian role in the peace process, and this need accelerated after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022; and third, Michels' efforts were supported in Brussels by a plethora of EU actors, from the European External Action Service (EEAS) to the EU Foreign Affairs Council (Sammut 2023). What we observed in this moment is the EU's first steps away from the compartmentalisation of security issues in Armenia and their incorporation into the wider agenda.

Ultimately, the higher degree of volatility in the regional security created *new opportunities for more assertive EU policies on both democracy support and peacebuilding,* such as the introduction of the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) established in January 2023 (Council of the EU 2023), the US-EU-Armenia Joint High-Level Dialogue (EU et al. 2024), the provision of EU military assistance to Armenia (Council of the EU 2024b).

Under Pashinyan's leadership, Armenia steadily pivoted towards the EU, but it is too early to say that it fully abandoned its security relation with Russia, although it suspended its participation in CSTO in 2024. The pivot towards the EU was welcomed by the European institutions with the European Parliament supporting a motion advocating for Armenia's EU accession and Member States agreeing to launch work on a new EU-Armenia Partnership Agenda that should lead to "more ambitious joint priorities for cooperation across all dimensions" (Council of the EU 2024a).

In July 2024, the Council of the EU adopted an assistance measure under the European Peace Facility (EPF) in support of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia worth 10 million euros. It is envisioned that this measure will (1) enhance the logistical capacities of the Armenian Armed Forces, (2) contribute to improved protection of civilians in crises and emergencies and (3) enhance the resilience of Armenia and accelerate interoperability of its Armed Forces in case of possible future participation of the country in international military missions and operations, including those deployed by the EU (Council of the EU 2024b).

The EPF support alongside with the EUMA created further opportunities for expanding the *social embeddedness of EU security cooperation* with Armenia. EU support is directly aimed at the country's defence sector, yet the bloc remains cautious in its approach, taking into account the sensitivity of the area and the lingering Russian influence. This means that the focus is predominantly on technical assistance rather than improving

democratic practices of the armed forces, for example through improved civilian oversight. A lot more needs to be done to rid Armenia of Russia's influence in the security sector. For instance, for decades most employees of Armenia's National Security Service were trained in Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) academies. While Pashinyan's government created a new Foreign Intelligence Service in 2023, it will take years to gain security independence from Russia (De Waal 2024a).

It is yet too early to assess the extent to which new EU initiatives in the sphere of security have contributed to the improved *social empowerment* of local actors, engaged in Armenia's security affairs and further still Armenian population, especially communities that had to relocate from Nagorny Karabakh. Nonetheless, it is possible to expect this to change in the future if Armenia decides to pursue EU membership, while then the bloc will be able to rely on the leverage of conditionality to promote democratisation practices in the country overall and its different policy areas. The EU's *social accountability* in security practices in Armenia is also slowly shifting with civil society actors, including those funded by the EU such as EaP CSF Armenian National Platform but not only, showing more interest in scrutinising EU actions.

Going forward, the EU's role in Armenia's democratisation and regional security remains a delicate balancing act. Armenia's growing disillusionment with Russia and its desire to diversify foreign policy options present both challenges and opportunities for deeper EU engagement. The evolving geopolitical landscape, particularly in the wake of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and Azerbaijan's military offensives, offers new opportunities for the EU to assert its role in the South Caucasus. However, the EU must overcome its inconsistent approach to the region and align its economic and diplomatic efforts with its values in order to remain a credible partner for Armenia.

9.3 EU lessons learnt?

9.3.1 From AA to CEPA: A lesson of strategic adaption

The dynamics of EU-Armenia relations starting with the 2013 watershed moment when the AA negotiations failed due to reasons explained above and continuing with Armenia's EU accession aspirations endorsed by various EU actors, are an example of policy evolution and strategic adaption.

The failure of the first AA led to a fundamental reassessment of the EU's approach towards Armenia and ultimately towards all partner countries within the EaP policy. It can be said that it triggered the development of more tailored approach, both bilaterally and multilaterally. The subsequent CEPA is a clear example of this strategic adaptation, showing the EU's capacity to balance out rather ambitious cooperation goals with the understanding of partner countries' evolving complex geopolitical needs and challenges. CEPA's rather unique structure is an example of the compromise between keeping key elements of the original AA with Armenia (i.e. political dialogue, justice, freedom, and security), while accommodating the country's other commitments towards the EAEU and CSTO. This approach has proven to be instrumental in the evolution of EU-Armenia relations mostly due to the fact it has equipped Armenia with concrete opportunities for strategic foreign policy diversification, that ultimately led to a rapprochement with the EU and Western partners.

Second, recent policy developments, including the 2024 new EU-Armenia Partnership Agenda launch and the introduction of the Resilience and Growth Plan (European Commission 2024), show a joint steady commitment to deepening bilateral relations. Third, the initiation of visa liberalisation dialogue[1] and support through the EPF (Council of the EU 2024b) contribute to the thesis that the EU learnt how not to lose momentum in its relations with Armenia, pursuing a rather long-term partnership agenda.

In spite of some lessons learnt stemming from CEPA, several fundamental challenges persist in the EU-Armenia relations. They require careful considerations and can be considered lessons (un)learnt (yet) or about to be learnt.

9.3.2 Armenia's EU ambitions: Countering Russia's influence and boosting the benefits of EU accession

Armenia is steadily converging towards the EU, as recently demonstrated by the government's endorsement of the bill to start EU accession (Paternoster 2025). However, the EU should make it clear that Armenia's path to EU membership will not be straightforward as the country is still facing several reform challenges (Pilibossian and Nazaretyan 2024). With the

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[1] European Commission DG for Enlargement website: *Armenia*, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/node/3419_en.

war in Ukraine, Moscow can no longer afford the same hard-power status in the South Caucasus, particularly after prioritising a strategic alliance with Azerbaijan over its traditional ties with Armenia (De Waal 2024b). Nevertheless, Moscow views the region as far from lost, even in countries pursuing formal EU membership (De Waal et al. 2024). Russia is likely to leverage its soft power to maintain influence in Armenia, including intervening in domestic politics, potentially prior and during upcoming 2026 elections, or applying increasing economic pressure. For this reason, the EU should proceed cautiously and not underestimate Russia's influence in Armenia, particularly in the context of Armenia's ongoing energy and trade dependence on Russia (Interview 2). The cases of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine and the level of Russian interference during various moments in time shows that the Russian element cannot be underestimated. In spite of their many differences, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia share a similar level of vulnerability exploited by Russia in different shapes and forms. Their societies remain prone to misinformation and disinformation generating from Russia. In this regard, the EU should enhance its communication strategy towards the EaP countries, both multilaterally and bilaterally. So far, in certain cases this has been insufficient in countering Russia's robust propaganda machine, and unable to convey more effectively the benefits of EU membership to ordinary citizens.

Regarding regional stability, Armenia's EU future remains uncertain. The EU should prioritise supporting the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as unresolved tensions provide Russia with opportunities to exploit the region's instability (De Waal 2024a) and the country's vulnerabilities. Tackling Russia's tactics and threats will require the EU to balance short-term agility with sustained long-term investment in resources and engagement (De Waal 2024a). For this to be successful, the EU needs not only to prioritise democratic reforms in the country, but also ensure its own practices are aligned with democratic principles and in equal measure ensure social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability.

Conclusion

The past ten years have seen an exceptional dynamic shift in the EU-Armenia relations, which could probably be characterised as a pendulum. Armenia's long-standing conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan and

security concerns increasingly inform and shape Armenia's swings to and from the EU.

In the last decade, five events could be noted as historic turning points, which have shaped Armenia's relations with the EU. In 2013, the failure to sign the Association Agreement with the EU signified Armenia's shift towards Russia. Being a member of Russia-led regional organisations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union, solidified this shift. However, in 2017, the EU and Armenia signed CEPA, which was a step downwards from the AA, but certainly a step forward from the previous few years of rather uneven relations. The 2018 Velvet Revolution shook Armenia's domestic political scene and triggered a slight redirection towards democratisation and diversification of foreign relations. The two security crises at Nagorno-Karabakh led to a certain disillusionment with Armenia's perceived security partners, especially Russia. This series of disappointments informed a further improvement of EU-Armenian relations, which could signify the start of a period that is encouraging for EU democracy support in Armenia.

This period has also seen the evolution of the EU as a security and democracy promoting actor in the country. In 2013, the EU's role in Armenia's security was negligible, while its foreign policy practices towards the country were lacking the democratic nature. The bloc *failed to use the AA negotiation process as a leverage for the promotion of democratic reforms in the country,* treating the partnership predominantly as a straightforward economic alignment, disregarding Armenia's complex security calculus. The missed opportunity to sign the AA and the period thereafter were characterised by the absence of social empowerment and social accountability from EU actions, while social embeddedness remained limited, with the EU focusing on Armenian political elites and a handful of large civil society organisations.

While signing CEPA marked a slight improvement in EU-Armenia relations, it was not until the Velvet Revolution of 2018 that we started observing noticeable changes in the democratic-ness of EU foreign policy action in Armenia. The Velvet Revolution allowed the EU to expand the social embeddedness of its practices in the country by engaging with a wider variety of state and non-state actors. The EU's Civil Society Facility and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (including its EaP CSF Armenian National Platform) work to empower the diverse civil society sector through funding and capacity-building opportunities, ensuring

that civil society remains a key stakeholder and equal interlocutor in EU-Armenia relations. We also started observing the improved social accountability of EU foreign policy action in Armenia as more CSOs monitor its activities in the country. Nonetheless, the EU's role in Armenia's security policies remained peripheral until 2020-2023, when the bloc started moving away from the preferred method of compartmentalising wars in Nagorny Karabakh as an issue of separate diplomats and started considering more strategic action. The EU played an important role in the peace talks, following Azerbaijan's offensive in 2023. It offered Armenia tangible support in the form of the EUMA and 10 million euros from the EPF. There were signs that the EU was paying more attention to the local context and local knowledge in Armenia, yet it is too early to say how open the EU will be to the scrutiny of local actors and local communities when it comes to cooperation in the security sphere. Thus, it is possible to state that by 2023-2025, the EU has largely improved the democratic nature of its foreign policy action and security work in Armenia, yet with the country's security sector remaining closely connected to and affected by Russia, there is still a need for further improvement, especially in social empowerment and social accountability.

Against this background, two key lessons in bilateral relations were (hopefully) learnt by the EU. Based on the overview of EU-Armenia relations in the last decade, it is possible to say that the first lesson the EU learnt in the country is the importance of adaptation. An example of policy evolution and strategic adaptation can be seen in the dynamics of EU-Armenia relations, which began with the 2013 watershed moment when the AA negotiations failed for the reasons previously mentioned and continue with Armenia's EU admission aspirations supported by various EU actors. The EU's approach to Armenia and, eventually, to other partner nations under the EaP strategy was fundamentally reevaluated as a result of the first AA with an EaP nation failing. One may argue that it spurred the creation of a more specialised strategy on both a bilateral and global level. This strategic flexibility is exemplified by the succeeding CEPA, which demonstrates the EU's ability to strike a compromise between understanding partner countries' changing complicated geopolitical demands and problems and achieving relatively ambitious cooperation goals.

The second lesson for the EU is to make an effort in estimating the role of Russia in each country it deals with. In order to keep its influence in Armenia, Russia is probably going to use its soft power, which might

include putting further economic pressure or getting involved in domestic politics, possibly before and during the 2026 elections. Because of this, the EU should exercise caution and not undervalue Russia's influence in Armenia, especially given the country's continued reliance on Russia for trade and energy. The Russian element cannot be understated, as demonstrated by Russian military aggression against Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine as well as the extent of Russian meddling at different points in time. Despite their numerous distinctions, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia all have a comparable degree of vulnerability that Russia takes advantage of in various ways. To varying degrees, their societies are vulnerable to false information and disinformation coming from Russia. In this sense, the EU should improve both its bilateral and multilateral communication approach with the EaP nations. This hasn't always been enough to combat Russia's powerful propaganda apparatus and better explain to the general public the advantages of EU membership. The future of Armenia in the EU is still unclear in terms of regional stability. Supporting the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan should be the EU's top priority because unresolved tensions provide Russia the chance to take advantage of the country's weaknesses and the instability of the area.

List of interviews (online)

1. Interview with a civil society representative, 20 September 2024
2. Interview with a Yerevan-based civil society representative, 24 September 2024
3. Interview with a civil society representative, 24 September 2024
4. Interview with a civil society representative, 27 September 2024
5. Interview with an EU official, 27 September 2024

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10.
EU Foreign Policy Practices and Democracy Support in Ukraine

Anna Osypchuk and Anton Suslov

This chapter looks at how the European Union's relationship with Ukraine has unfolded and what this tells us about the EU's ability to rethink its external actions. Over the past decades, moments of upheaval in Ukraine, from political crises to the full-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine in 2022, repeatedly pushed the EU to reconsider both its priorities and its methods of engagement. By tracing these turning points, the chapter explores how the EU's role has shifted in practice, particularly in the areas of security and in efforts to support democracy, good governance and the rule of law.

The analysis draws on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include materials from the focus groups conducted in Ukraine, as well as interviews and statements from Ukrainian and EU officials published in the media and on official websites, along with relevant policy documents. All focus-groups participants were informed about the purposes of the data collection and their rights as participants, and had an opportunity to read an information leaflet as well as ask questions. Thus, their consent for participation was duly obtained. To maintain the confidentiality of participants, their names had been coded. Secondary sources include policy and academic publications on EU democracy support in Ukraine and the Eastern neighbourhood. These sources offer a grounded view of how EU policies have been perceived and experienced by those directly affected. They also help reveal where EU policies have been open to local voices and where they have remained more rigid or distant.

By bringing these strands together, the chapter reflects on what the EU has effectively learned in its engagement with Ukraine, and where important lessons remain unlearned, as it continues to navigate one of its most consequential partnerships.

10.1 Historic turning points in the EU-Ukraine relations since 2013 and potential moments of epiphany

10.1.1 Historic turning points

In reviewing the EU-Ukraine relations since 2013 we will be going over the historic critical junctures as path-altering events and moments and epiphany which combine into two notable turning points in these relations. While Ukraine has been one of the pillars and priorities of the EU foreign policies due to its geographical and geopolitical position, particularly within the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (EEAS 2021) and an Eastern Partnership (EaP), its prospects and strategic importance have been undergoing a dramatic change since 2013 and even more so since the full-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine in 2022. Thus, this chapter assesses the transformation and nuances of the EU's democracy-related engagement in Ukraine since 2013 in the context of security cooperation and enhancement and support of democracy, good governance, and the rule of law.

While integration with and into the EU has been consistently supported by Ukrainian society and discursively present in its government's rhetoric, Ukraine has been offered a role of part of the EaP and an ENP by the EU. Over 2007-2012 an advanced Association Agreement (AA) had been negotiated between Ukraine and the EU, which included a substantial economic integration through the establishment of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Simultaneously, Ukraine was denied political integration as formal institutional inclusion in the EU structures (Raik et al 2024). It also should be noted that at that time (and until mid-2014), Ukraine had been formally maintaining a position of neutrality, particularly within military and security spheres.

The AA/DCFTA had been scheduled for signing at the November 2013 summit in Vilnius, however, it's been suspended by Viktor Yanukovych, who bowed to Putin's pressure and made a U-turn on the AA/DCFTA and European integrations at the last moment and particularly after their meeting in Sochi earlier same month. Such a geopolitical shift triggered mass protests known as "Euromaidan" throughout the country. Within a week and after police violence, it spread and evolved into a much larger people's uprising known as "Maidan" or "Revolution of Dignity" with a much broader agenda regarding not only (pro-)European choice but democracy and democratic freedoms and human rights.

In February 2014, the Maidan culminated in the mass shooting of the protesters and Yanukovych's flight to Russia. The Ukrainian Parliament (*Verkhovna Rada*) took the lead and the political part of the AA was signed on 21 March 2014. Still, using the moment, Russia invaded Crimea in late February 2014 and tried to annex it. Russia also instigated ''separatist'' groups in Donbas, which was followed by Russian military aggression.

The European Union officials supported the Maidan as a democratic movement as well as condemned and sanctioned Yanukovych and his supporters. After the democratic government was re-established (also by democratic Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2014), the EU strengthened and diversified its support for Ukrainian reforms, particularly regarding democracy, good governance, and the rule of law. This support has been aimed not only at deepening European integration of Ukraine but also at enhancing Ukraine's resilience against Russian hybrid aggression.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has been a dramatic game-changer and made the EU re-evaluate its "integration-but-not-accession" policy. As EU integration has been considered not only a way to intensify economic and political development of the country, but also a way to increase Ukraine's capacity to tackle security threats, the Ukrainian government applied for EU membership just four days after the full-scale invasion began. In June 2022, the EU granted the candidate status to Ukraine, opening the formal way to accession reforms including those that strengthen Ukraine's democracy. In part, the support of Ukraine has always (or at the very least, since 2005) been containing not only the support for democracy and reforms IN Ukraine, but also the support of a democratic country against authoritarianism and autocratic regimes, particularly Russia's.

In this chapter, we are focusing on two dimensions – security and democracy, good governance, and the rule of law – as those that are not only outlined as priorities for cooperation by EU-Ukraine bilateral agreements and ENP, but are also of utmost importance for the existence of Ukraine as a democratic sovereign state. The strategic importance of these dimensions and long-term policy objectives for cooperation within EaP had been outlined in a list of documents and statements. For example, the EU's Joint Communication on the 'Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020' states that "Good governance and democratic institutions, rule of law, successful anti-corruption policies, fight against organised crime, respect of

human rights and security, including support to populations affected by conflict, are the backbone of strong and resilient states and societies" (European Commission 2020:8-9).

Let us now analyse these two historical turning points regarding the EU-Ukraine relations and the EU democracy support policies and democratic practices employed over them. We would also take into account the growing geopolitical tension over the past decade, particularly the growing conflict with Russia.

10.1.2 2014: Democratisation and Europeanisation

Following the Maidan and Yanukovych's fleeing, the new Ukrainian government signed both political and economic parts of the Association Agreement. Although the AA primarily focuses on trade and economic cooperation, it also addresses political issues, reforms, the rule of law, freedom, and security. Thus, the Agreement had become a cornerstone of further EU's policy towards Ukraine till 2022.

Taking the AA as a legal basis and considering Ukrainian society's demand for changes, the EU both financially supported reforms and put political pressure on the Ukrainian government when it lacked the political will to implement them. The most salient example was anti-corruption reform aimed at creating an institutional framework for the prevention and investigation of corruption. Although the Ukrainian government and parliament adopted all the necessary laws and legal acts, implementation largely appeared to be window dressing. So, the EU made relevant conditions a part of the visa liberalisation process, acknowledging it as a "very powerful tool to bring about change in the area of anti-corruption" (European Commission 2016a:11). It is noteworthy that the EU also recognised a prominent role of the local civil society in enhancing the reform, developing relevant laws, and watchdogging their implementation (European Commission 2016a:8).

Reform of the law enforcement and judiciary was among the Maidan's demands and became one of the EU's policy priorities. To assist Ukraine in this field, the EU established an Advisory Mission for Civilian Security Sector Reform Ukraine (EUAM Ukraine) in July 2014 (Council of the EU 2014). With support from the EU and member states, the new law enforcement bodies of the National Police and the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) were introduced, the General Prosecutor's office was reformed, and changes within the judicial system, including strengthening of its inde-

pendence and establishment of the new Supreme Court, were held (European Commission 2016b, 2018).

The reforms not only touched upon judges and police officers but also broader – the whole public administration sector. Within the ministries, the directorates and special "Reform Support Teams" were set up to make institutions more efficient (Ukraine Cabinet of Ministers 2018). To make the public sector more transparent, a new recruiting platform was created and more data on the institutions' budgets and activities became available. The EU also contributed to the transformation of public services through the development of the Administrative Service Centres and digitalisation (EU Neighbours East 2021).

A crucial reform the EU supported significantly was decentralisation. Its main idea was to amalgamate small municipalities into self-sufficient communities and transfer more power, both political and budgetary, to the local level (European Commission 2016b). The introduced changes "enhanced the development of local democracy by supporting grassroots political and civic engagement" (Romanova and Umland 2019:11).

Within all the above-mentioned reforms and measures, the EU extensively cooperated with the Ukrainian civil society, which became a significant actor both watchdogging the government and participating through consultancy in policymaking. Also, the EU facilitated media freedom through reforms and specific projects. The most prominent step was the establishment of the politically independent public broadcasting service *Suspilne,* which contributed to the diversification of the Ukrainian media landscape. The EU also supported investigative journalism (EU Delegation to Ukraine 2021). Thus, acknowledging the civil society and independent media's role, the European Union provided funding to strengthen their institutional capacities and facilitate their activities, including through the European Endowment for Democracy.[1] As a consequence of the direct cooperation between the EU structures and Ukrainian civil society, the CSOs, including independent think tanks, not only promoted their ideas to the EU institutions through the formal channels, as Eastern Partnership Civil Society Platform and the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform foreseen by the Association Agreement, but also through informal advocacy visits and meetings (European Commission 2018).

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[1] EU Delegation to Ukraine website: *Projects*, https://eu4ukraine.eu/en/projects-en.

Though not all reforms were immediately successful, and some of them faced opposition among the Ukrainian elites, their vector and content followed the society's demand for European integration, internal changes, and justice after the Maidan. Thus, albeit facilitated by the EU, these reforms are locally grounded and democratic by their design. Also, they contributed to strengthening democracy as a practice by enhancing social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability. All of them were aimed at creating institutional infrastructure for more transparent, inclusive, and efficient governance, both on the national and local levels. Decentralisation not only transferred power to the communities, but also made citizens more responsible for the local affairs and facilitated more active formation of social ties, which contributed to the country's resilience during the full-scale Russia's invasion (Rabinovych et al. 2024). Increased transparency, which was among the objectives of the anti-corruption and public administration reforms, opened new opportunities for watchdogging to keep public institutions accountable.

As expected, all structural reforms need time to make a change. In 2021, 52 per cent of respondents admitted that they could feel the reforms' consequences; only 1 per cent estimated them positively, while 23,6 per cent recognised both positive and negative sides of the reforms (Info Sapiens 2021). Similarly, only 24,3 per cent of respondents (compared with 16,5 per cent in 2017) witnessed changes for the better due to the decentralisation (Razumkov Centre 2021). Nevertheless, citizens' empowerment and enhanced civic participation, which covers not only already active and influential civil society but also other citizens, laid the foundation for deeper social embeddedness of the democratic practices and understanding of democracy as a value.

10.1.3 Democracy amidst full-scale war

The ground-breaking shift in the EU-Ukraine relations came within a few days of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The magnitude of it on one hand made the Ukrainian government to apply for EU membership on the fourth day of the invasion, and on another – the EU to acknowledge and support this application not just rhetorically, but also by action. Thus, in June 2022, the EU granted the candidate status to Ukraine also restarting the accession process for other candidate countries.

The EU leaders' rhetoric framed the full-scale aggression and war in terms of defending democratic and European values and democracy as

such. Thus, significant attention has been paid to supporting Ukraine as a democracy against an authoritarian regime and not just to democracy support in Ukraine. As one of the reports mentioned: "democracy and democracy support intertwined with Western efforts to buttress Ukraine and to isolate Russia" (Young et al. 2023:17). Further still, "EU reactions to the war contained some democracy support elements" (Young et al. 2023:17).

On the day of the full-scale invasion, the martial law has been activated in Ukraine and prolonged ever since (each time for a 90-day period as prescribed by the law). Most significantly, under martial law no elections could be held in Ukraine (local or national) and certain basic freedoms could be limited – namely freedom of speech and information, and freedom of association (i.e., the right to protest) (Visit Ukraine 2024, Kyrychenko and Chyrkin 2024). In reality, the instances of protests, rallies, and gatherings being banned or forbidden are few and rare, and the limitations to freedom of speech and information are implied mainly to information and messages that are security sensitive and could be used by the enemy in targeting and correction of its missiles, drones etc. Also, martial law presumes amendments to the community self-government structure and procedures in the areas defined as front-line as well as to the de-occupied areas (Boyko and Andriy 2025).

Still, the introduction of martial law had not stopped the democratic processes in Ukraine, including civic engagement and meaningful participation, functioning of (independent) media, functioning of government and local authorities' accountability and transparency instruments and procedures, and reform process in different sectors in Ukraine.

Considering the EU's policies in the area of democracy, good governance, and the rule of law, the most notable are the following steps made by Ukraine, based on the seven recommendations to launch accession negotiations outlined by the European Commission in 2022: 1) introduction of a competitive selection process for the Constitutional Court; 2) renewal of the High Council of Justice; 3) renewal of the High Commission for the Qualification of Judges; 4) further insurance of an institutional independence of National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine; 5) appointment of the head of the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO); 6) adoption of a new media law; 7) implementation of the anti-oligarch law (European Commission 2022, Bulana and Holubytska 2025).

Such steps had been assessed positively by the European Commission, and based on the European Council's decision, the accession negotiations

for Ukraine were formally launched on 25 June 2024. Some experts remark that the dynamic of the EU-Ukraine relations changed and "the EU has become not just a strategic partner but also a co-architect of reforms defining both content and sequencing" (Bulana and Holubytska 2025:2). The principle of conditionality and implementation of clearly defined benchmarks became central-key EU support mechanisms, including the Ukraine Facility (Council of the EU 2025) are delivered in accordance with them. Also, the EU democracy support policies in Ukraine, particularly in the areas of governance and the rule of law, are now intertwined with Ukraine's accession process: passing of the screening process, opening of the negotiations on particular chapters, the fulfilment of accession criteria, harmonisation of legislation and adaptation of *acquis communautaire*.

As it has been mentioned above, the EU leaders' rhetoric in 2022 shifted from supporting democracy in Ukraine to supporting Ukraine AS a democracy. Some experts remarked that while "EU leaders' rhetorical commitments to defending democracy [… were] more ubiquitous and high-profile than in previous years. On the other hand, it pushed the EU's immediate policy priorities away from democracy issues and toward more directly security-related concerns" (Young et al. 2023:40). Most notably – to securitise the EU, to assist Ukraine in the military and security spheres, as well as to sanction Russia and to cut down the EU's energy dependence on Russia. Still, even though the EU support and policies towards Ukraine are lining more into supporting the security sphere, including military support, it shouldn't be juxtaposed to the democracy support. As Ukraine is fighting an existential war with Russia, the survival of democracy in Ukraine is no less dependent on its ability to fight Russia's aggression and to resist than on the conventional democratic reforms.

Looking more closely at the security dimension of the EU policies, the following initiatives and measures should be mentioned:

- adoption of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (Council of the EU 2022);
- launching of the Support Group for Ukraine (SGUA) and the Solidarity Lanes;[2]
- initiating legislation in the Common Security and Defence Policy field: on common defence procurement (EDIRPA); on ammunition production

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[2] European Commission DG for Enlargement website: *Ukraine*, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/node/3433_en.

(ASAP); defence investment gap analysis (jointly with EDA) (Tyushka et al. 2023:28-29);

• extension of the mandate of the EU Advisory Mission (EUAM) and launching of the EUMAM in 2022;[3]

• development and introduction of a variety of formats to include both the EU and Ukraine officials regarding cooperation in the security and defence spheres.

It should be noted here that probably none of those initiatives are "the one-way" policy of the EU towards Ukraine, unless we count the direct military assistance by delivering weaponry and ammunition. All those steps and initiatives are based on the presumption that the EU and wider European security could not be ensured without the enhancement of Ukraine's security and strengthening its capacity to fight Russia's aggression. Such a framework excludes considering the EU or Ukraine's security separately and emphasises their mutual dependence. Furthermore, over the three years of Russia's full-scale aggression and after the uncertainty and probably even undermining of old Euro-Atlantic alliances by the Trump administration, the perception of common EU-Ukraine security as well as actions and policies coming from such understanding become even more prominent and mainstream.

Still, focusing on security, defence and resisting Russian aggression does not exclude attention to reforms and their progress either for the EU or for the Ukrainians. In a September 2024 representative survey ordered by the EUAM, 74 per cent of Ukrainians defined fighting corruption as the most urgent reform, while 62 per cent marked it as a priority for the EU support. Next ranked (with a 36 per cent support each) were reforms of the national security and defence sectors and the judicial system reform. Respondents also emphasised that the EU should give priority to such spheres as assistance to liberated territories (43 per cent), support in investigating war crimes (38 per cent), and guaranteeing fair justice (31 per cent) (Rating Group 2024:5, 16).

It is noteworthy that in assessing the efficiency of the EU's support for reforms or assistance in different spheres, the Ukrainian respondents lumped it with the assessment of the success and speed of the particular reform itself. Thus, according to the EUAM's commissioned survey in

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[3] EEAS website: *EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eumam-ukraine_en.

2024, the EU support is seen as effective in helping liberated territories (48 per cent see it as effective) and strategic communication support (44 per cent). While it is perceived as ineffective in the rule of law area (65 per cent see it as ineffective) and in fighting corruption (70 per cent) (Rating Group 2024:18). These attitudes of not distinguishing the progress and speed of reforms and the role of the EU support and initiative for these reforms are both highlighting the importance of those reforms and their necessity as perceived by Ukrainians, and the emphasis and expectations that are placed on the EU in ensuring them. Particularly, ensuring the rule of law, fighting corruption, and judicial reform are seen both as the most pressing and those in which the EU's support is crucial. Also, these results regarding particular reforms correlate with the perception of the EU's support and aid in general. For example, according to the EUAM commissioned survey in September 2023, while 75 per cent agree that EU aid is useful (and only 15 per cent consider it not useful), 56 per cent consider such aid insufficient (and only 34 per cent consider it sufficient) (KIIS 2023:33). Here it should also be noted that such perception might also have been influenced by the dissatisfaction with the amount and speed of the military aid from the EU in 2023.

Nevertheless, in the SHAPEDEM-EU representative survey on understanding and attitudes towards democracy and the EU democracy support, 70 per cent of Ukrainian respondents agreed with the statement that "The EU demands our government to be more democratic" with only 7.8 per cent disagreeing (Osypchuk and Suslov 2024:14). This underlines the importance that is placed on the EU in ensuring the reforms' progress and success in Ukraine, particularly in the areas of democracy, governance, the rule and law, and security and defence sectors.

Looking at the EU aid and support for Ukraine as well as at its rhetoric, the following deductions should be made. First, the EU support initiatives and actions as well as its leaders' rhetoric have been closely socially embedded with values, normative principles, and expectations of Ukrainian society – both its government and civil society as well as local communities and ordinary people. Most notable that could be seen in the support for Ukraine as a democracy against full-scale Russia's aggression and in opening for Ukraine the accession path to EU membership. If there is any critique of the EU support here on part of particular Ukraine communities of practice, it's about the amount and speed of the support and not about its substance or focus. Secondly, the remarkable resilience that is de-

monstrated by Ukraine in 2022 has been largely due to the social empowerment and the EU initiatives and its continued aid in these spheres. Finally, regarding social accountability, some local communities of practice are also insisting on the EU exercising more pressure towards the Ukrainian government to adhere to the reforms, particularly in the rule of law sphere and in reforming the law enforcement and security sectors.

10.2 Conclusion: EU lessons learnt?

10.2.1 From denial to the steady geopolitical awakening

During the Maidan, the EU tried to balance between a neutral position of mediator between the protesters and Yanukovych's government and an actor who (cautiously) supported the democratic protest. Maidan's victory and further democratic elections, along with Russia's unprovoked aggression in Crimea and Donbas, pushed the EU to change its position from a distant observer to a political (then not security) partner both for the government and civil society. Since 2014, the EU has framed challenges that Ukraine faces as those relating to all of Europe. Thus, it was in 2014 when the EU realised the utmost importance of its active presence in Ukraine, including support for democracy and reforms. Additionally, the military, albeit hybrid, character of the Russian invasion raised the issue of Ukraine's resilience. Resilient Ukraine, both for the EU and local citizens, has been understood as a democratic country with efficient institutions, including those in the security sector. Though the EU denied its participation in the geopolitical competition and, consequently, aiding Ukraine militarily and granting any real prospects of membership till 2022, it invested in Ukraine's resilience through support of democratic transformations, rule of law, and good governance enhancement showing that it learned the lessons not only from EU-Ukraine relations history but also from its previous interactions with the Eastern neighbourhood.

In 2022, when Russia unleashed full-scale aggression against Ukraine, the international environment became more competitive, and a military threat approached the EU borders. Over the course of the last three years, there has been a growing understanding within the EU about the necessity to support Ukraine both in military and in terms of enhancing its resilience (democratic, societal, etc.), and about the fact that Russia's aggression and the war Ukraine is fighting is a common European threat which means paying more attention to security and defence. What's more

– such understanding has been accompanied by actions and policies as well as by strategic documents: from the granting of candidate status to Ukraine to joint EU and EU-Ukraine military and defence initiatives. This is a stark contrast to the EU's reaction to the start of Russia's aggression in 2014 and the occupation of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions and thus constitutes a lesson learned.

It also should be noted, that for decades, while many EU democracy support policies targeted Ukrainian government, state institutions, and national and local authorities, their closest ally in advocating democratisation has been the Ukrainian civil society. At the same time, the CSOs, local communities, including marginalised groups, and independent media have been among the main recipients of the EU support. The events of 2013-2014 demonstrated that there could be a strong and involved civil society to first fight authoritarian tendencies of the Yanukovych government, and then to resist the Russian aggression and outsource and watchdog weak and much distrusted state institutions. 2022 demonstrated that resilience to full-scale aggression is only possible if there is a societal unity when civil society and state institutions work as partners aided by international allies. In many ways, the EU policies towards Ukraine have been rooted and fine-tuned according to the feedback and recommendations provided by Ukrainian CSOs and experts. Thus, Ukrainian local communities of practice have been playing a crucial role in the EU's democratic support learning and policy making.

10.2.2 More, better, faster?

Could the EU do anything to make its policies regarding Ukraine more efficient, particularly in the case of areas of security and democracy support (rule of law, human rights, and good governance)? The key issue here is that these policies are not just about the support of Ukraine as one of the neighbouring countries of the EU. Since 2014 and even more so since 2022, Ukraine has transformed from just one of the Eastern neighbourhood countries into a geopolitical battlefield, where the EU is one of the sides – even if unwillingly. The EU does not have any choice than to oppose Russia and its allies in their quest to overturn the current world order and spread autocratic practices, if the EU wants to preserve democracy, rule of law, and human rights. Thus, the challenges the EU, along with Ukraine, is facing demand determination, flexibility, and asymmetric measures, primarily in the security and defence. Among other things, it means streamlining decision-

making procedures and bureaucracy, safeguarding against autocratic tendencies within the EU member states, and providing and maintaining a clearly defined and followed conditionality (benchmark-based) accession path for Ukraine. The latter will also enhance the ability of both the EU and the Ukrainian civil society to watchdog the Ukrainian government and ensure that there is no democratic backsliding in Ukraine under martial law, particularly in such areas as the rule of law and human rights.

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11.
EU Democracy Support and Civil Society in Georgia

Nona Mikhelidze

Over the past decade, Georgia – a candidate country for European Union's membership – has witnessed historic uprisings and widespread democratic protests. As these movements continue to unfold with uncertain outcomes, the EU's response to these critical moments becomes a subject of paramount importance.

In June 2022, while Ukraine and Moldova were granted EU candidate status, Georgia received only a European perspective accompanied by a list of 12 conditions. Brussels explained this decision by pointing out that, although Georgia performed comparably to Ukraine and Moldova in the technical implementation of the Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), its democratic credentials and progress toward democratic transition lagged significantly. By autumn 2023, the European Commission reported that Georgia had fulfilled only three of the 12 conditions. Key areas such as de-oligarchisation, depolarisation, judicial reform and others – requiring substantial political will – remained largely unaddressed.

However, in December 2023, despite falling short of the EU's conditions for candidate status, Tbilisi was unexpectedly granted the designation. This decision bolstered the ruling Georgian Dream party while undermining efforts for meaningful democratic reform. Rather than spurring progress, the EU's failure to enforce conditionality effectively backfired. The Georgian government interpreted candidate status as validation of its approach, intensifying authoritarian measures. It reintroduced the controversial 'foreign agents' law' (dubbed the 'Russian law') and proposed anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, drawing stark parallels with regressive policies seen in Russia.

These moves triggered mass protests across Georgia and drew widespread condemnation from the European Union, individual member states and international human rights organisations. In response, Brussels began discussing the possibility of halting Georgia's EU integration process. Protests temporarily subsided in anticipation of the October 2024 parliamentary elections, as many hoped that a democratic change of government could address the country's political crisis. However, those hopes were dashed. The ruling party orchestrated massive electoral fraud and, soon after the elections, announced the suspension of Georgia's EU integration process. This move was unconstitutional, violating Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution, which mandates every government to uphold the country's Euro-Atlantic integration path.

The announcement sparked an unprecedented wave of nationwide protests, uniting generations and regions under a single demand: new parliamentary elections; the scale and intensity of these protests reflecting not only the profound discontent with the ruling party's actions against Georgia's path towards the EU but also the widespread desire for a return to democratic norms and constitutional governance.

Thus June 2022, December 2023 and October 2024 – along with the ongoing protests – mark pivotal turning points in Georgia's democratic transition as well as in the EU's approach to supporting democracy in the country also through engaging local civil society.

11.1 Analytical framework and research questions

This chapter examines the EU's behavioural practices in Georgia, specifically in the context of reinforcing civil society within its democracy support policy and asks to what extent are the EU's external actions imbued with democratic principles when supporting civil society in Georgia? Put differently, what role does democracy – understood as social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability – play in shaping the EU's external engagement? How does the EU position civil society as a decisive actor in Georgia's political landscape? Have the historical turning points prompted Brussels to rethink its approach to democracy support? Has the EU adapted its behavioural practices when it comes to the support of the civil society in a way that reflects genuine learning and evolution? In other words, can the EU transform into a learning institution – one that not only reassesses its role in a rapidly changing global landscape

but also becomes more accountable both internally and externally, particularly to the societies impacted by its policies?

By critically engaging with the dimensions of social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability as conceptually defined in the first chapter of this volume, the following pages seek to understand whether the EU's approach to civil society support in Georgia aligns with democratic principles or whether it merely replicates top-down governance models that does not strengthen local agency and participation. Ultimately, the findings contribute to broader discussions on EU democracy promotion, institutional learning and the evolving relationship between the EU and its partner countries.

To assess the extent of EU (un)learning in the realm of democracy support, this chapter focuses on historic turning points – defined as path-altering events or critical junctures that reshape the domestic political environment in Georgia. These events challenge existing power structures and governance models, triggering periods of reflection within the EU. During these phases, various actors within the EU reassess events, scrutinise their own approaches and consider potential shifts in priorities. However, such reflection does not necessarily result in learning or behavioural change. Whether these moments lead to genuine transformation – 'epiphanies' in which the EU fundamentally rethinks its democracy support practices – is one of the core questions this chapter seeks to answer.

11.2 EU civil society support in Georgia: An overview

In political science literature, civil society is conceptualised as a collective actor capable of entering the political arena and leveraging existing institutions to advance its agenda (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2016). However, in the Georgian context, civil society organisations (CSOs) have struggled to exert consistent influence over political processes. Over the years, despite the prevalence of democratic discourse, the expected substantive engagement of CSOs in governance and policymaking remained limited as well as their capacity to effectively contribute to policy dialogue or influence state decision-making. Public trust in CSOs remains notably low, with widespread scepticism and political apathy contributing to a broader disengagement from civic life. Structurally, many Georgian CSOs continue to face persistent operational challenges. These include limited financial self-sufficiency, a weak culture of membership-based support, a lack of transparency and minimal grassroots engagement.

A number of scholars have suggested that part of the responsibility lies with the international donor community, whose funding mechanisms – while critical – may inadvertently inhibit the long-term sustainability of civil society by fostering dependency and distorting organisational priorities (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2016). The reliance on external funding has had profound implications for the strategic orientation of Georgian CSOs. The necessity to conform to donor priorities often diverts organisations from their original missions and weakens their responsiveness to local needs. Furthermore, the broader political context exacerbates these difficulties: Georgia's highly polarised political environment has contributed to the politicisation of CSOs themselves, undermining their perceived neutrality and constraining their ability to operate as independent and credible policy actors (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2016).

The European Union has long supported Georgian civil society, recognising its role as both a pressure group and a driver of change. The EU's assistance has been particularly relevant in promoting democratic governance, strengthening human rights and encouraging sustainable local development. This support is channelled through two principal instruments: the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities Instrument (CSO/LA) (Emerson and Kovziridze 2021). Between 2019 and 2024, Georgian CSOs received approximately 46.1 million euros in EU funding, supporting 47 projects implemented by more than 170 civil society actors across a wide range of sectors. This funding was directed toward enhancing human rights protection, democratic participation, rural development and legal alignment with EU norms (EU Delegation to Georgia 2024). Additionally, in February 2025, the EU launched the "REACT for Georgia" initiative, a two-year project with a total budget of 1.57 million euros. The initiative aims to strengthen local CSOs, boost civic engagement and promote democratic governance (EU Delegation to Georgia 2025). In light of recent democratic backsliding and political polarisation, the EU has proposed redirecting over 100 million euros in aid from the Georgian government to CSOs. This reflects a strategic shift toward empowering non-state actors and supporting democratic values in response to emerging governance challenges (JAM News 2024, Council of the EU 2024).

Despite the EU's longstanding support, its funding mechanisms have often overlooked grassroots movements, politically influential actors and community-based civil society initiatives. This has limited the inclusiveness and representativeness of civic engagement in Georgia. The EU's

broader integration strategy in the country has predominantly followed a top-down model, in which civil society is expected to play a technocratic role – delivering services and supporting democratic and market-oriented reforms – without challenging the stability of the state (Axyonova and Bossuyt 2016). Although the EU's discourse emphasises the political importance of civil society, its assistance programmes tend to treat CSOs as apolitical actors, primarily responsible for providing socio-economic services or technical expertise, particularly in aligning domestic legislation with EU standards as observed in Tunisia (as observed by Boiten 2015, Buzogány 2018).

In the Georgian context, this dynamic has increasingly pressured CSOs to collaborate with the government in meeting the EU's 12 conditions for candidate status. One of these conditions explicitly called for "ensuring the involvement of civil society in decision-making processes at all levels" (EEAS 2022). However, rather than empowering independent civic engagement, this provision has often been instrumentalised to legitimise government-driven processes. As will be examined in the following sections, this alignment has come at a significant cost to the fundamental role of civil society: holding power to account. Instead of functioning as autonomous watchdogs, certain organisations have become complicit in supporting the government's superficial EU integration narrative – even when this has required turning a blind eye to democratic regression.

This technocratic framing has also exacerbated internal tensions. Civil society actors working in similar thematic areas often diverge sharply in their political approaches or strategic priorities. Such tensions have surfaced within the Georgian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), where several prominent human rights organisations have withdrawn in protest – citing irreconcilable differences with both the government and the platform's internal dynamics (Interview 1).

Against this backdrop, this chapter examines the case of the Georgian National Platform and the nature of the EU's engagement with it. The central question is whether this engagement has meaningfully advanced democratic development and strengthened the broader civil society sector in Georgia.

11.3 EaP Civil Society Forum: A case of the Georgian National Platform

The formal frameworks of cooperation between civil society in Georgia and the European Union consist mainly of three initiatives that should work in parallel: the multilateral Civil Society Forum, the bilateral Civil Society Platform and the Domestic Advisory Group on sustainable development issues. The multilateral Civil Society Forum of the European Eastern Partnership (EaP), which was established in 2009, prior to the signature of the Association Agreement, brings together members of civil society from all six countries included in the EaP, each with their individual country platform. The Georgian National Platform (GNP) of the EaP CSF comprises approximately 185 member organisations. These members are organised into four working groups aligned with the thematic platforms of the Eastern Partnership, with the flexibility to establish subgroups as needed (IDFI 2014).

The GNP, backed by EU funding and occupying a prestigious position within the civil society landscape, has served as the primary institutional mechanism for facilitating dialogue between Georgian civil society and the European Union. It has been assigned by a central role not only in the implementation of the Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) (Emerson and Kovziridze 2021), but also in coordinating civil society's involvement in meeting the EU's conditions for granting Georgia candidate country status. This role is explicitly outlined in the EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society (EEAS 2021), which designates the GNP as a key interlocutor in the broader process of European integration.

However, while the GNP serves as a significant platform for civil society engagement in Georgia, some CSOs have raised concerns regarding its composition and effectiveness. Critiques have been directed at the inclusion of numerous organisations perceived as inactive or ineffective, which some argue dilutes the platform's overall impact. Additionally, the process for admitting new members has been a point of contention, with calls for greater transparency and inclusivity (Interview 2).

The historical turning points in Georgia introduced above and surrounding the issue of EU candidate status has sparked intense debate within Georgia, spanning both government and civil society circles. Notably, certain CSOs have struggled to maintain objectivity when assessing the country's democratic development and the legitimacy of its bid for

candidate status. Rather than offering a critical and balanced evaluation, some CSOs have promoted the slogan: "Candidate status at any cost" – even if it means overlooking democratic backsliding.

Rather than fulfilling their role as watchdogs, some CSOs have become complicit in constructing a façade of compliance with the EU's 12 conditions for candidate status. A telling example is the appointment of Levan Ioseliani as Ombudsman in March 2023 – an event publicly framed as progress toward fulfilling one of the EU conditions by members of the Georgian Civil Society Platform during their presentation in Brussels on 17 November 2023 (EESC 2023a). However, Ioseliani's close alignment with the ruling authorities and his unwillingness to advocate robustly for vulnerable groups -particularly the LGBTQ+ community – reflects the deeper costs of this co-optation. His appointment underscores how the appearance of democratic progress can be used to mask substantive regression, with civil society actors, wittingly or not, lending legitimacy to this process.

Civil society organisations for GNP have also taken part in the selection of key public officials, including the Chair of the Central Election Commission, through formal nomination procedures established by the government. However, in practice, these processes have frequently been dominated by the ruling party. While some CSOs have engaged in these procedures under the premise of promoting transparency and inclusiveness, their participation has, at times, inadvertently lent legitimacy to outcomes that were effectively predetermined. Instead of acting as meaningful checks on political power, such mechanisms often serve to create the illusion of democratic engagement – particularly when the appointment of candidates aligned with the ruling party is virtually guaranteed from the outset.

In a similar vein, the Georgian National Platform signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the government in October 2023, ostensibly to strengthen collaboration between state institutions and civil society. Yet this initiative has appeared more as an effort to simulate the fulfilment of EU conditions than a substantive move toward genuine democratic reform.

In line with the narrative of securing candidate status 'at any cost', the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform issued a Joint Statement on 6 November 2023, falsely asserting that "Georgia's visible progress in addressing EU fundamentals and in advancing reforms in the crucial areas of rule of law,

human rights, strong institutions and democratic development [had] to be recognised" (EESC 2023b). The Platform went on to recommend that the European Council grant Georgia EU candidate status, fully aware that, at the time, only three out of the twelve conditions set by the EU had been meaningfully fulfilled. Worryingly, some members of the Platform began to suppress dissenting voices within the civil society sector. Those who sought to engage the public with intellectually honest assessments – arguing that candidate status must be based on genuine democratic progress – found themselves marginalised. In certain circles, the debate shifted from a matter of principle to a litmus test of loyalty: questioning unconditional support for candidate status risked being branded as unpatriotic. These dynamics have fuelled internal tensions within the Georgian National Platform, ultimately prompting the withdrawal of several prominent CSOs who no longer viewed the structure as a credible or independent actor in the democratic process (Interview 3).

The above-mentioned statement by the Platform not only distorted the reality of Georgia's reform efforts but also undermined the civil society sector's credibility as an independent watchdog. This trend reflects a troubling shift within parts of Georgia's civil society, where collaboration with the government has gradually displaced independent oversight. In prioritising access and influence over accountability, a significant portion of the sector has compromised its core watchdog function and weakened its ability to shape public discourse or hold authorities to account. The foundational role of civil society – to offer citizens transparent, principled and honest guidance – has, in many cases, been subordinated to political convenience and short-term strategic gains.

The consequences have since become clear. Granting EU candidate status to Georgia in December 2023 has backfired. Since then, Georgia has been experiencing a deepening of democratic backsliding and the consolidation of authoritarian practices. The government has increasingly relied on repressive tactics, including the detention of peaceful protesters and the enactment of restrictive laws targeting civic activism. These developments have seriously jeopardised the operational space – and in some cases, the very survival – of civil society organisations in Georgia.

Last but not least, the youth-led protests that erupted in Georgia in 2024 – and continue to this day – have laid bare the shortcomings of the EU's civil society engagement strategy. Not only has the EU miscalculated in its methods of supporting democratic development, but it has also

backed the 'wrong' actors within civil society. The nationwide mobilisations have revealed that the driving force behind civic resistance lies not with the established leadership of the Georgian National Platform, but with a new generation of activists. On the streets of Tbilisi, a different civil society has emerged – led by the so-called Zoomers or Gen Z – who operate outside traditional CSO structures. Their self-organisation, creative energy and independence have redefined civic engagement, breaking away from the stagnant models of post-Soviet NGOs.

Conclusions

This chapter set out to critically examine the European Union's democracy support in Georgia, focusing in particular on its engagement with civil society. Against the backdrop of major political turning points between 2022 and 2025 – including the controversial granting of EU candidate status and the eruption of youth-led mass protests – this analysis has exposed the limits of EU behavioural practices in promoting democratic values and empowering civil society actors on the ground. The findings suggest that the EU's approach, while rhetorically aligned with democratic ideals, remains largely technocratic, hierarchical and insufficiently adaptive to local political realities and grassroots dynamics.

In terms of social embeddedness, the EU's engagement with Georgian civil society has lacked genuine inclusivity. Although Brussels has supported a significant number of CSO initiatives – particularly through instruments like EIDHR and the CSO/LA – the focus has remained on established, professionalised CSOs that are often disconnected from the broader public. Civil society has been treated primarily as a functional extension of policy implementation, rather than as an arena for bottom-up democratic contestation and societal participation. Mechanisms such as the Georgian National Platform were intended to institutionalise civic dialogue, yet they have become increasingly elitist, exclusionary and co-opted by state-aligned interests. The EU's failure to reach beyond these traditional structures has led to a form of 'performative inclusion', where participation is formalised but lacks substantive democratic engagement.

Regarding social empowerment, the EU has largely exported a pre-defined model of civil society engagement based on liberal, depoliticised and post-Soviet NGO archetypes. This approach has failed to recognise the evolving nature of civic activism in Georgia, particularly the rise of decentralised, youth-led movements that are organically embedded in society

and driven by democratic urgency rather than donor compliance. The EU's support has not sufficiently fostered local ownership or engaged with indigenous democratic knowledge. Instead, it has often prioritised technical alignment with EU norms at the expense of supporting authentic, community-based democratic empowerment. This dynamic has weakened the third sector's strategic autonomy and may have contributed to the co-optation of certain civil society actors into government-led processes, especially around key milestones such as the pursuit of EU candidate status. In the meantime, the youth-led protests of 2024-2025 have revealed a powerful civic capacity that operates entirely outside the conventional donor-funded CSO sphere, calling into question the very assumptions underpinning EU democracy support.

On the dimension of social accountability, the EU's democracy promotion strategies in Georgia have lacked meaningful mechanisms for policy feedback and self-correction. Even in moments of political crisis, Brussels has shown reluctance to reassess its support frameworks or engage critically with the consequences of its partnerships. The EU's mechanisms for consultation and feedback with local actors have remained largely procedural, while the ability of some local organisations to influence or reshape EU democracy support strategies has remained limited. The co-optation of certain CSOs into government-led processes, including in the flawed implementation of EU conditionality, underscores the dangers of an unaccountable civil society policy. The EU's continued reliance on organisations that offered uncritical endorsement of 'candidate status at any cost' – despite evident democratic backsliding – has not only compromised the watchdog function of civil society, but also damaged public trust in civic actors. By contrast, grassroots mobilisations have demonstrated far greater responsiveness to public sentiment and a more credible claim to represent democratic accountability.

Crucially, the historic turning points in Georgia did not serve as catalysts for meaningful EU learning. The granting of candidate status in December 2023 – despite Georgia's non-compliance with most of the EU's own conditions – revealed a breakdown of conditionality as a core principle of democracy support. Rather than reassessing its tools and partners, the EU doubled down on engagement with traditional civil society actors, some of whom became complicit in legitimising the government's façade of reform. While the EU has since attempted to reallocate aid from the government to civil society, this shift remains insufficient unless it is

accompanied by a fundamental overhaul of how civil society is defined, selected and empowered.

The challenge for the EU moving forward is not merely one of recalibration, but of epistemic and institutional unlearning. It must abandon rigid, donor-centric models and recognise that democratisation in Georgia is now being driven from below – by youth, activists and communities operating without formal recognition or international funding. The protests of 2024-2025 mark a decisive moment in this transformation, offering a clear signal that civil society is no longer synonymous with post-Soviet NGOs, but is instead a living, dynamic force rooted in generational change and grassroots legitimacy.

Ultimately, the question is not only whether the EU can learn from its experiences in Georgia, but whether it is willing to unlearn some of the entrenched practices that have limited the effectiveness of its democracy support. This would require a shift from viewing civil society primarily as an instrument of policy implementation to recognising it as a dynamic and autonomous actor in the democratic process. Doing so could help the EU build more resilient and responsive partnership with the third sector, both in Georgia and in other contexts where democracy remains contested and in transition.

List of interviews

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2: Interview with a representative of a Georgian CSO, February 2025
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CONCLUSION

12.
Fragmented Practices, Shared Lessons: EU Democracy Support in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods

Akram Ezzamouri

Over the past decades, the European Union has placed democracy at the core of its foreign policy, reflecting its normative identity as a supporter of human rights, rule of law and good governance. However, scientific literature and policy practice increasingly show that EU democracy support has shifted over time from a primarily normative agenda to one often shaped by geopolitical considerations (Balfour 2024). Security, energy, migration and regional stability frequently took precedence over democratic principles. This evolution reflects broader tensions within the EU as a "multilevel polity" (Hooghe and Marks 2001), where central institutions, member states, civil society and local actors interact in ways that can both enable and constrain democracy support. Discursive contestation within the EU has been particularly influential in shaping this trajectory. As chapters on EU narratives under Part I of this volume have shown, debates and contestations among EU stakeholders highlight persistent gaps between rhetorical commitments to democracy and democracy support, and their translation into policy practice. This shows the limits of the EU as a coherent and able-to-learn actor.

This final chapter advances this argument providing a cross-case analysis of EU democracy support in six countries (Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine in the Eastern Europe, and Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia in the Southern neighbourhood) covering 2011-2025. It draws on research on narratives of contestation within the EU, highlighting who shapes knowledge about democracy support, which voices are excluded and which barriers or enabling factors influence democratic learning. This chapter

also explores how democratic principles (social embeddedness, empowerment and accountability) are reflected in EU actions, both in democracy support and in connected areas such as trade, migration, energy and security (Achrainer and Pace 2024).

In line with the general approach adopted in this volume, democracy and democracy support are approached here as contested practices. Democracy is seen as "embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings" (Schatzki 2001: 12) and as "an aspiration that manifests in local democratic practices, which both shape and are shaped by local democratic background knowledge" (Achrainer and Pace 2026a). This perspective emphasises that democracy is not just institutional but lived and learned through continuous participation, repeated engagement and the shared development of democratic knowledge among diverse actors.

A central innovation advanced by the SHAPEDEM-EU project and this volume is the Democracy Learning Loop. As Achrainer and Pace (2026b) explain, the Democracy Learning Loop consists of three separate yet interrelated learning loops aimed at transforming EU democracy support from a one-way, top-down approach into a collective reciprocal learning process. Loop 1 "shows a way for the EU to improve its democracy support practices by refocusing them on local democratic knowledge and practices", while Loop 2 "suggests joint learning of different EU actors to avoid self-sabotaging democracy support by performing contradicting practices in the fields of energy, migration, security, and trade". Loop 3 enables local actors in both EU member states and partner countries to "learn from each other's experiences and thereby build up democratic knowledge". By integrating insights from Korosteleva and Kudlenko (2025b) and Makdisi et al. (2025) on local perceptions, from Fijał et al. (2025) on EU civil society actors, and from Abrami et al. (2025) and Schöppner et al. (2025) on non-EU external actors, this final chapter proposes entry points where democratic learning can be operationalised with the development of the Democracy Learning Loop.

12.1 Fragmented democratic practices in the EU's neighbourhoods

The relationship between the EU and its Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods has been marked by recurrent turning points, moments in which

shifts in domestic political trajectories or regional crises forced the EU to affirm or adapt its position discursively and behaviourally with regard to the very principles it claims to embody. This revealed, in some instances, ambivalences of the EU as a democracy supporter. The research presented in this volume advances that the EU's democracy support practices cannot be reduced to a uniform model but instead oscillate between projecting norms and accommodating local or geopolitical constraints. The EU's own commitment to democraticness (defined through social embeddedness, empowerment and accountability) was repeatedly tested, often compromised, but at times recalibrated in ways that shed light on the possibilities of reflexive learning. What emerges from a cross-case analysis is a picture of fragmented democratic practices: moments of responsiveness and local embeddedness alternate with patterns of elite-centred engagement and securitisation, producing outcomes shaped both by the EU's internal tensions and by the external contexts in which it operates.

On *Lebanon* (see Chapters 2 and 6), the EU discursive practices on democracy were consistently subordinated to stability and crisis management. Narratives emerging from Brussels and from EU Delegations often positioned Lebanon as a fragile state whose democratic potential was conditional on containing security threats and managing the refugee crisis. The "setting" was discursively constructed as one of permanent emergency, where the EU was seen as a promoter of regional stability. This framing justified behavioural practices that prioritised short-term order over long-term empowerment. Since 2017, EU financial commitments surpassing 1.2 billion euros were channelled primarily toward refugee assistance, border management and the strengthening of state institutions. Yet the structuring logic of these interventions was containment. The Association Agreement and European Neighbourhood Policy frameworks cast Lebanon as a partner in migration control, emphasising resilience and shared responsibility. While the EU's emphasis on supporting public services such as health and education provided a degree of embeddedness by offering relief to both host communities and refugees (primarily from Syria) amid economic crisis, this approach prioritised stability and border management without conditioning aid on non-refoulement, and largely sidelined long-term measures such as legal employment pathways. In the security sector, projects such as Security Sector Reform in Lebanon and community policing initiatives sought to professionalise security forces and cultivate civic engagement. Yet these

initiatives were hindered by entrenched power structures that diluted accountability, leaving local communities with little influence over reform trajectories. Even in the sphere of trade, the Barcelona Declaration's promises of regional integration produced limited gains, with exports heavily concentrated in low-value goods and few incentives for diversification.

Palestine presents an even starker contradiction between EU commitments and behavioural outcomes (see Chapters 3 and 7). From the early post-Oslo years, EU discourses were infused with the language of state-building and democratic transformation, yet the practical orientation of policy privileged the consolidation of security institutions aligned with donor priorities. In practice, EU assistance consolidated a security-first paradigm that empowered the Palestinian Authority's (PA) security apparatus while sidelining grassroots participation and wider claims for rights, justice and democracy. Behaviourally, in the West Bank, the EU invested heavily in training and professionalising the PA's security forces through initiatives like EUPOL COPPS, but these practices became accountable primarily to international donors and, indirectly, to Israeli security interests, rather than to Palestinian citizens. This left Palestinian citizens disempowered and alienated. The democraticness of EU practices in Palestine results therefore fundamentally compromised: social embeddedness is weak; social empowerment absent, as local agency is marginalised; and social accountability lacking, since feedback mechanisms from civil society are largely ignored (see Chapter 7). The events of 7 October 2023, when Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups attacked southern Israel, killing more than 1,100 people and abducting 250, and Israel launched an unprecedented surge of violence that has killed more than 65,000 Palestinians in Gaza – described by observers and jurists as amounting to genocide (OHCHR 2024, 2025) – did not produce a significant shift in this pattern within the EU. While over 1.44 billion euros in humanitarian aid was mobilised to the Palestinian people, the EU's reliance on the PA as a security partner persists, despite widespread Palestinian criticism of its complicity in occupation structures. The restriction of civil society organisations through donor-imposed conditionalities further narrowed the space for grassroots empowerment. As a Palestinian civil society representative noted, democracy support under conditions of occupation and colonial control becomes an oxymoron: the very framework of intervention denies sovereignty, making discursive commitments hollow. The EU's democracy support and foreign policy practices in Pale-

stine thus reveal a structural incapacity to embed democratic practices where the basic conditions of self-determination are absent, exposing the contradictions of external democracy support when entangled with occupation and settler colonialism.

Tunisia, by contrast, illustrates the temporal erosion of EU democracy support practices and democraticness. In the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution, the EU labelled Tunisia as a "success story" of the regional protest movements, with narratives celebrating its potential as a model of political transition and democratic transformation (see Chapter 8). Tunisian civil society, youth movements and reform-minded politicians were celebrated as agents of transformation. Initially, behavioural practices seemed aligned with this discourse: EU programmes such as PARMSS embedded accountability mechanisms and sought to build transparency within the Ministry of the Interior. Social empowerment was pursued through engagement with reformist actors, and social embeddedness appeared in efforts to link assistance with grassroots oversight. However, as political assassinations, terrorist attacks and migration pressures mounted, the EU's framing and practices started shifting around 2014-2015. The plotline became one of fragility and threat, with Tunisian stability tied to Europe's own security. Behaviourally, this reorientation manifested in technocratic and securitised interventions that abandoned earlier commitments to inclusive reform. By the time of President Saied's 2021 self-coup, the EU's cautious criticism was not matched by behavioural adaptation: migration and border management took precedence, while democracy support became marginal. Here, the contestation within EU institutions over whether to continue treating Tunisia as a partner in democratic transition was resolved through the language of "pragmatism," which operationally prioritised short-term stability and interests. The result was the erosion of democratic practices: embeddedness declined as local actors were excluded and also silenced by Tunisian authoritarian practices, empowerment was blocked by entrenched elite structures and accountability was bypassed in favour of centralised cooperation.

Shifting to the Eastern neighbourhood, *Armenia* followed a different trajectory, one in which commitment to democratic practices increased over time but remained uneven across policy domains (see Chapters 5 and 9). Discursively, the EU's position was constrained by Armenia's geopolitical dependence on Russia, particularly around the failed Association

Agreement of 2013. The EU's self-conception here was ambivalent: it framed itself as a normative partner but accepted Armenia's ties with Russia as a structural limit. This discursive pragmatism translated behaviourally into elite-focused diplomacy with little local embeddedness. The signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement in 2017 marked a shift in both discourse and practice. The EU began to adopt a narrative of Armenia as a reform partner, with civil society and watchdog groups increasingly seen as central characters in the story of reform. The Velvet Revolution of 2018 proved as a turning point: the EU discursively aligned with the revolution's democratic aspirations and behaviourally expanded its partnerships with grassroots actors, NGOs and youth groups. Social empowerment increased as EU support for NGOs and media nearly doubled, and embeddedness deepened through more participatory programming. Yet, in the security field, democratic practices lagged, as the EU justified its limited role by acknowledging Armenia's dependence on Russia and maintained a restrained approach in its security cooperation. It was only after Russia's passive stance during the last war in Nagorno-Karabakh that the EU recalibrated, launching the EU Mission in Armenia in 2023. The case of Armenia highlights that when local political will converges with EU interests, practices can take a more democratic direction, but structural dependencies may constrain the reach of empowerment and accountability in specific policy sectors.

The case of *Georgia* presents the dangers of EU discursive and behavioural dissonance (see Chapters 5 and 11). On the one hand, EU discourse continued to emphasise democratic values and conditionality as core to the country's accession process. The "plot" of the EU's narrative described Georgia as a candidate state undergoing reform, with accession as the reward for progress. However, in practice, the EU's decision in December 2023 to grant candidate status despite clear democratic backsliding contradicted its own rhetorical commitments. This choice undermined democratic conditionality and signalled to domestic elites that authoritarian practices would not block European integration. Social accountability was eroded as Georgian citizens' protests against democratic regression were effectively ignored in rethinking EU approach to democratic support. Furthermore, EU civil society support in Georgia revealed a pattern of technocratic elitism, with funds concentrated on established NGOs disconnected from new grassroots protest movements, reproducing donor dependence rather than social empowerment. Contestation within EU institutions over

conditionality was resolved through geopolitical considerations (i.e. the intention to anchor Georgia within the EU orbit amidst Russian pressure), but behaviourally this line exacerbated democratic deficits. The protests of 2024-2025, driven by local actors mobilising across generations, represented a new democratic energy that the EU failed to engage. In response, Brussels proposed redirecting over 100 million euros in aid from government channels to civil society organisations, representing a case of surface learning and an effort to adapt to shifting civic realities.

The case of *Ukraine*, finally, demonstrates the possibility of alignment between discursive practices and behavioural democraticness, even within a context of ongoing open conflict with Russia (see Chapters 5 and 10). Discursively, the EU framed Ukraine's 2014 Maidan Revolution as a democratic awakening aligned with European values, positioning civil society as heroic actors in a struggle for justice and transparency. Behaviourally, this translated into conditionality-based reforms tied to visa liberalisation and the Association Agreement, embedding accountability mechanisms and empowering civil society watchdogs. The decentralisation reforms were locally demanded, EU-supported and enhanced both empowerment and embeddedness. The 2022 full-scale invasion created a new change in EU-Ukraine engagement and democratic practices. Ukraine was no longer seen as merely aspiring to democracy, but started to be seen as democracy under attack. This shift in discourses pushed behavioural practices that intertwined democracy support with security and military assistance. Candidate status and accession negotiations were then fast-tracked. Despite martial law, civic engagement and media oversight in Ukraine continued, with citizens ranking anti-corruption and judicial reform as top priorities. Perceptions of inadequate EU aid underscored the need for stronger feedback loops, but the dynamic between Brussels and Ukrainian society has become one of mutual dependence. Here the EU moved beyond rhetorical democracy support to recognition of Ukraine as a democracy in practice, illustrating the potential alignment of discourse and behaviour when local agency is central and mechanisms supporting reform are both credible and responsive.

Taken together, the six cases reveal that the EU cannot be seen as a consistent democracy-supporting actor, but rather as a fragmented polity whose practices vary according to context, contestation and strategic calculation. On Lebanon and Palestine, the dominance of securitisation discourses and practices erode democraticness. Tunisia illustrates the col-

lapse of an initially promising democratic agenda under the weight of shifting priorities and local politics. Armenia demonstrates a partial expansion of democratic practices, occurring when EU expectations and strategic interests align with local dynamics, though still constrained by structural dependencies. Georgia reveals the costs of dissonance in EU democracy support, where the rhetoric of conditionality collapses in practice, while Ukraine highlights the potential for democratic practices when EU discourse, strategic calculations, local agency, and behavioural practices reinforce one another.

Across all cases, certain patterns emerge. First, the EU's discursive practices and internal narratives of contestation consistently framed democracy as an essential component of its identity, yet its behavioural practices often subordinated democratic principles to security, migration or geopolitical imperatives. This is most evident in Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia, where stability and control overshadowed empowerment and accountability. Second, when domestic mobilisations created openings, as in Armenia's Velvet Revolution and Ukraine's Euromaidan, the EU displayed greater capacity to embed democratic practices, though asymmetries persisted, particularly in the security domain. Third, the reliance on elite-level civil society engagement, evident in both Lebanon and Georgia, repeatedly constrained embeddedness and overlooked emergent grassroots actors. Finally, the EU's readiness to compromise reforms for strategic ends, as in Georgia and Tunisia, undermined its credibility as a democracy supporter, whereas in Ukraine its consistent linkage of reforms to conditionalities reinforced both accountability and mutual trust.

12.2 Perceptions of EU democracy support in the neighbourhoods

Local actors across the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods articulate a remarkably consistent critique of EU democracy support that both corroborates and deepens the SHAPEDEM-EU project's finding of an interest-driven EU that fails to engage structural causes of democratic deficit.

Local empirical evidence Korosteleva and Kudlenko (2025b) on the Eastern neighbourhood and Makdisi et al. (2025) on the Southern neighbourhood paints a convergent yet locally contrasting picture: across both regions, EU democracy support is widely perceived as top-down, "technical" and "activity-driven," producing mistrust, dependency and a pro-

nounced gap between rhetoric and lived realities. In the East, survey and focus groups data reveal that democracy lives as much in self-organisation (e.g. volunteer mobilisations in Ukraine) as in formal institutions; citizens associate democracy with freedoms and civic power but also flag that EU programmes disproportionately target national elites and established civil society organisations and excluding less affirmed grassroots actors (Korosteleva and Kudlenko 2025a). In Georgia, sizeable shares of respondents (38 per cent) view "European values" as a threat to tradition, highlighting that democracy support practices without local mediation, or better social embeddedness, breeds resistance and necessitates (un)learning on all sides (Korosteleva and Kudlenko 2025b). In the Southern neighbourhood, qualitative interviews and focus groups show intensified resentment where EU priorities (migration, border control, securitisation) appear to sideline democratic transformation: interlocutors describe aid as engendering a "culture of dependency" and a "menu à la carte" approach that privileges EU interests over structural reforms (Jallad et al. 2025). Palestine and Lebanon exemplify this political risk, as EU technical programming amid occupation or elite co-optation is read as complicity or performative lip service, exacerbating perceptions of incoherence and illegitimacy (Jallad et al. 2025). Local perceptions from both the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood identify common operational obstacles in democratic practices and EU democracy support. Opaque gatekeeping by intermediaries, complex funding procedures and a bias toward well-resourced partners systematically blocks inclusive engagement and stifles feedback loops. As discussed by Fijał et. al. (2025), civil society organisations within EU member states can play a critical role in counteracting these dynamics by supporting participation, monitoring and social cohesion in the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood, though their dependence on external financing also raises dilemmas of autonomy. At the same time, the broader international landscape complicates EU action, as external actors such as the United States, China or Gulf states pursue strategies in the EU Neighbourhoods that blur the line between democracy support and authoritarian consolidation.

12.3 Putting the democracy learning loop into practice

This comparative picture has significant implications for the Democracy Learning Loop. The EU's practices show that learning often remains partial,

selective and resistant to feedback from local actors. The comparative perspective demonstrates that the Union often perceives and reacts to democratic turning points in its Neighbourhoods in ways conditioned by its own strategic priorities, but the effectiveness and credibility of its democracy support depend on its ability to adapt to local agency and to institutionalise feedback loops. In the case studies from the Southern neighbourhood and Georgia, contestation within EU institutions failed to produce reflexive adaptation, resulting in practices that privileged stability over democraticness. Armenia and Ukraine, however, suggest that when the EU is willing to recalibrate its discursive narratives in response to local changes – as in the Velvet Revolution or Euromaidan – behavioural practices can become more democratic.

The Democracy Learning Loop requires precisely this openness to local experience and willingness to decentre European assumptions and knowledges, but the EU's record shows that such learning is uneven. The challenge for EU institutions is to institutionalise reflexivity, to ensure that contestation within Brussels and within the Southern and Eastern neighbourhood translates into practices that embed empowerment and accountability rather than suppress them. In other terms, for the EU to embody its professed values, it must cultivate the capacity for embracing pluralised and contextualised practices of democracy not as add-ons to security or other short-term priorities but as constitutive dimensions of its foreign policy. Only by doing so can the EU hope to move beyond the hierarchical dichotomy of "democratisers" and "democratisees" (Achrainer and Pace 2024:13) and genuinely coproduce democratic practices with its neighbours.

Concretely, then, the promise of a Democracy Learning Loop is conditioned not only on institutional will but on concrete reforms: simplifying access, rebalancing funding to community actors, investing in civic and media education, and treating contestation as actionable input rather than external critique. Only by addressing these empirical faultlines can EU practice move from transactional stability management toward locally embedded, accountable democracy support. In this light, the EU should:

- *Put local voices, priorities and conceptions of democracy at the centre*. As discussed, EU democracy support has too often flowed through national elites or established NGOs, leaving out the grassroots actors where much of democratic life actually happens. The EU should create safe, open and periodic spaces where it can systematically listen to the

local experiences, and adapt programmes accordingly to make support more relevant, less elitist and closer to everyday democratic practices.

• *Break down barriers to funding and support*. Many local stakeholders from the Neighbourhoods struggle to access EU support because procedures are too complex and tailored to big and more structured organisations. This fuels dependency and reinforces gatekeeping by well-connected intermediaries. To counter this, the EU should design more flexible forms of support that small organisations can actually use, whether through micro-grants, rapid-response aid, or multi-year core funding that allows organisations to plan ahead their work. Making funding accessible to a wider range of civil society actors in the neighbourhoods will broaden ownership of democracy support and reduce the perception that it serves only a select few.

• *Align democracy support with all EU foreign policies*. The EU's credibility suffers when democracy support is undermined by competing priorities, such as migration control in Lebanon and Tunisia, or geopolitical considerations in Armenia and Georgia. To change this, democracy should not be treated as a separate policy area but as a guiding principle across foreign policies. This means ensuring that initiatives in these areas do not contradict democratic goals, or even do not hinder the enjoyment of rights. In addition to its local benefits, a clearer alignment would eventually strengthen the EU's image as a consistent and trustworthy actor.

• *Invest in learning and resilience through education*. Sustainable democracy requires more than institutions; it needs citizens who are equipped to participate and resist domestic or external authoritarian pressures. Civic education, media literacy and support for independent media are crucial here. In places like Georgia, where European values are sometimes seen as a threat to tradition – also partly due to disinformation spread by external actors –, joint learning initiatives can foster dialogue and mutual understanding. Supporting both formal and informal education will help cultivate the skills, values and resilience that democratic practice relies on (Korosteleva and Kudlenko 2025b).

• *Protect civic space and support civil society under pressure*. Given trends of democratic backsliding in the Neighbourhoods, EU Delegations should systematically monitor restrictions on CSOs and grassroots activists, ensuring that EU aid is explicitly linked to the protection of civic

space. The EU should also fund legal defence mechanisms and provide targeted support to civil society actors facing repression or harassment. At the same time, care must be taken to avoid prescriptive measures that could limit the autonomy or operational space of local CSOs, as observed in Palestine, ensuring that support strengthens rather than constrains local democratic agency.

• *Make feedback and contestation part of the process*. Criticism, protest and disagreement are signs of democratic vitality, not threats to stability. Yet too often the EU treats contestation as noise to be managed rather than insights or claims to be acted on. Embedding regular feedback mechanisms (e.g. with a dedicated coordinating democracy learning unit), responding publicly to civic concerns, and being willing to adapt policies would turn critique into a source of democratic development. By normalising reflexivity and showing that learning is mutual, the EU can model the very democratic practices it seeks to support.

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This edited volume offers a critical analysis of the complex and contested field of European Union democracy support and democratic practices in its Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods. Drawing on extensive empirical and discourse research developed within the SHAPEDEM-EU project, and focusing on six case studies (Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia), it examines how the EU's democratic commitments are articulated, challenged and implemented in diverse neighbouring contexts. While democracy support is officially framed as a central pillar of EU foreign policy, this volume addresses the persistent gap between rhetoric and practical implementation. By combining discourse analysis with an investigation of policy instruments, it highlights how democracy is both narrated and enacted by the EU, revealing contrasts between its stated normative aspirations and interests.

By integrating discursive and behavioural perspectives, the volume offers insights into how the EU can rethink and reshape its democracy support and practices in its Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods. It highlights the need to move beyond symbolic commitments toward more inclusive, context-sensitive and socially empowering practices. Ultimately, it invites critical reflection on how the EU should strengthen its credibility and effectiveness as a supporter of democracy in an increasingly complex and contested regional landscape.

Akram Ezzamouri is a researcher in IAI's 'Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa' research programme.

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