SHAPEDEM-EU

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## Table of Contents


Abstract ..... 4
1 Introduction ..... 4
2 Description of Activities ..... 4
3 Results ..... 5
3.1 Work Package 2 - Policy Brief on EU-Armenia Relations ..... 5
3.1.1 Executive Summary ..... 5
3.1.2 Context/ Scope of Current Practices of Democracy (Support) ..... 6
3.1.3 Policy Alternatives ..... 7
3.1.4 Policy Recommendations ..... 9
3.2 Work Package 2 - Policy Brief on EU-Belarus Relations ..... 9
3.2.1 Executive Summary ..... 9
3.2.2 Context/ Scope of Current Practices of Democracy (Support) ..... 10
3.2.3 Policy Alternatives ..... 11
3.2.4 Policy Recommendations ..... 12
3.3 Work Package 2 - Policy Brief on EU-Ukraine Relations ..... 13
3.3.1 Executive Summary ..... 13
3.3.2 Context/ Scope of Current Democracy Support Practices (DS) ..... 13
3.3.3 Policy Alternatives ..... 15
3.3.4 Policy Recommendations ..... 16
3.4 Work Package 3 - Policy Brief on the Southern Neighbourhood ..... 17
3.4.1 Executive Summary ..... 17
3.4.2 Context and Scope of Current Practices of Democracy Support ..... 18
3.4.3 Comparative Dynamics: Systemic Patterns of Democratic Erosion ..... 20
3.4.4 Policy Alternatives ..... 20
3.4.5 Policy Recommendations ..... 22
3.5 Work Package 5 - Policy Brief on EU Member States' Democracy Support Practices 23
3.5.1 Executive Summary ..... 23
3.5.2 Context and Scope of Current Practices of Democracy Support ..... 24
3.5.3 Policy Alternatives ..... 25
3.5.4 Policy Recommendations ..... 26
3.6 Work Package 6 - Policy Brief on Non-EU External Actors - Rebuilding EU Democracy Support in the Southern Neighbourhood ..... 26
3.6.1 Executive Summary ..... 26
3.6.2 Context and Scope of Current Practices of Democracy (Support) ..... 27
3.6.3 Policy Alternatives ..... 29
3.6.4 Policy Recommendations ..... 31
4 Conclusions ..... 32
5 References ..... 33

## Abstract

SHAPEDEM-EU findings highlight current flaws in EU democracy support policies in its Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods and propose concrete steps for improvements. While there are some areas of convergence between two neighbourhoods, including shared frustrations with bureaucratic and top-down funding mechanisms, notable differences remain. In the East, partners welcome EU democracy support and find this imperfect but beneficial. In contrast, Southern neighbourhood stakeholders express growing alienation amidst the Union's ongoing credibility crisis as a normative power.

SHAPEDEM-EU's Work Package 8 (Dissemination and Outreach) sets out to shape policy and translate these findings into concise and actionable policy briefs with core policy recommendations. To this end, under deliverable 8.7, all thematic work packages produced policy briefs synthetizing their results. These briefs will be published on the website with open access, disseminated with EU policymakers and shared across social media platforms to maximise impact and outreach. By bringing together these insights and recommendations, SHAPEDEM-EU offers a timely contribution to shaping a more coherent, credible and effective EU democracy support strategy.

## 1 Introduction

At its outset, SHAPEDEM-EU outlined the ambition to translate its detailed and more academic research findings into actional and concise policy recommendations. While ensuring that its outputs are grounded in research and remain of the highest academic standards, SHAPEDEM-EU's Work Package 8 acknowledged the need to tailor these findings in a format accessible to policymakers in the EU, member states and candidate countries. To this end, the project developed a number of key policy briefs from the thematic Work Packages (WPs) – except for WP4, which already envisioned the production of a brief with policy recommendations. WP3-5-6 submitted one policy brief each, while WP2 provided three country-specific policy briefs.

To ensure consistency among the policy briefs, Carnegie Europe Foundation (CEF), Justus-Liebig-University Giessen (JLU) and EURICE convened meetings with all the authors and developed a common template. The resulting briefs are constructed to condense the findings of each WP for …. Each brief is structured around three elements: (i) context/scope of problem, (ii) policy alternatives and (iii) policy recommendations. The context communicates the importance of the problem to persuade the stakeholder audience of the necessity of policy action. The policy alternatives discuss proposed options to the current policy approach, clarifying why these options would be beneficial. Lastly, each brief concludes with up to five actionable and concise policy recommendations.

Once finalized, the policy briefs will be published on the project's website. They will be disseminated on social media and shared with EU policymakers so as to maximize their impact. This report brings these briefs together and concludes with reflections on their implications for EU democracy support.

## 2 Description of Activities

To effectively translate the project's academic findings into actionable policy briefs, CEF, supported by EURICE and JLU, developed a comprehensive template that served as a common reference point for all participating work packages. This template played a crucial role in ensuring coherence across the various briefs and provided clear guidance to partners on how best to communicate their core research insights in a policy-relevant format.

The template, developed by the EURICE team, was structured around four key components. First, partners were asked to prepare a concise executive summary. This summary was designed to offer a clear overview of the actors or processes investigated, the forms of democratic knowledge and practices assessed, and the actions proposed for the EU to strengthen its support for democratic practices.

Second, the template required an explicit description of the broader context and scope of current democracy-support practices. In this section, partners analysed the roles played by relevant actors and the democratic practices currently in place, while also identifying gaps, challenges, and the need for enhanced EU engagement and innovative tools.

Third, partners were encouraged to formulate a set of policy alternatives, elaborating on why these options could more effectively bolster democratic practices and how they could make better use of the democratic knowledge generated by the project.

Finally, the briefs concluded with up to five concrete policy recommendations. These recommendations outlined practical steps for implementation and were expected to integrate, where relevant, considerations related to cross-cutting issues such as gender equality and digital transformation.

CEF, in coordination with JLU, organized a series of online meetings with the leaders of the involved work packages. The primary purpose of these meetings was to present the policy brief template, gather feedback, and address any outstanding questions or concerns. In addition to these group sessions, a number of bilateral meetings were held between CEF and specific partners who required more detailed clarification on particular aspects of the template or the briefing process.

The template was also formally presented at the SHAPEDEM-EU annual conference, held at CIDOB in October 2024. This in-person forum provided an invaluable opportunity for direct exchange on the policy briefs, enabling participants to discuss challenges, share insights, and resolve any remaining uncertainties.

Once the initial drafts of the policy briefs were submitted, CEF undertook a thorough editing process. Feedback was provided to each partner, covering both substantive content and grammatical refinement, ensuring that the final briefs were clear, coherent, and aligned with the overarching objectives of the project. The policy briefs also played a key role in the drafting of the overall SHAPEDEM-EU's policy recommendations.

# 3 Results

## 3.1 Work Package 2 - Policy Brief on EU-Armenia Relations

### 3.1.1 Executive Summary

The European Union (EU)'s relations with Armenia have undergone a very dynamic transformation in the past 15 years. From the missed opportunity of signing an Association Agreement (AA) in 2013 to the current accession talks, Armenia has oscillated between the EU and Russia in its foreign policy preferences. It seems to have finally reached a point of a unique opportunity to engage in a meaningful and sustainable cooperation with the EU. It is especially important to make the most of this window of opportunity and improve EU democracy support policies towards Armenia.

In this policy brief, we provide five policy recommendations based on extensive research on EU democracy support in Armenia. To produce these recommendations, both primary and secondary

sources were consulted. Primary sources include original anonymous interviews and focus group discussions with Armenian civil society representatives and independent journalists.

### 3.1.2 Context/ Scope of Current Practices of Democracy (Support)

Armenia's state of democracy is complex, with both notable achievements and persisting difficulties. Since the major political upheaval brought about by the Velvet Revolution in 2018, the country has seen substantial democratic achievements. However, there are signs of societal polarisation and antagonism, reflected by divided public opinions over the future of the country as well as a considerable degree of mistrust toward official institutions and even civil society organisations. On a positive note, independent civil society in Armenia is still thriving, especially compared to its other neighbours in the South Caucasus.

In over three decades of bilateral relations, the EU and Armenia have created a dynamic relationship record. In the last 15 years, Armenia has alternated between moving closer to and distancing itself from the EU in its foreign policy. Under the pressure of security crises (Nagorno-Karabakh) and external foreign policy actors, such as Russia, Armenia's relations with the EU have seen both ups and downs.

In November 2013, Armenia, together with other Eastern Neighbourhood countries, planned to sign an AA with the EU. Two months prior to that, President Serzh Sargsyan's government unexpectedly halted talks with the EU. Instead, in January 2015, Armenia joined the Eurasian Economic Union, a Russia-led regional economic integration initiative. The negotiations for a new agreement, without a free trade clause, were relaunched in 2015 and completed in 2017 with the signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA; see full CEPA text at European Parliament 2018).

In 2020 and 2023, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia resulted in a geopolitical shift in the South Caucasus. According to Armenia, Russia failed to uphold its commitments as its main security guarantor. Many in Armenia felt betrayed by Russia, which led to yet another change in the nation's foreign policy: a move toward the EU. Furthermore, Russia's security guarantees to Armenia lost credibility due to its invasion of Ukraine and its failure to provide military alliance commitments under the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

In February 2024, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced Armenia's freeze on its CSTO membership. Following this, the country refused to engage with Aliaksandr Lukashenka, CSTO Chairperson, in any subsequent talks. In January 2025, Armenia took its first formal step towards EU accession process (Euronews, 2025). As of February 2025, it is arguable that Armenia is determined to pursue full membership in the EU, which opens a whole new range of opportunities for democracy support in the country.

Our data demonstrate that there is an overall agreement among respondents that Armenia is better off with the EU than without it. The EU's assistance for Armenian democracy has been crucial to certain aspects of its political and economic development, and Armenian society has benefited to an extent from EU funding and programmes. Nonetheless, EU democracy support should be improved in a few areas. Most respondents expressed disapproval at the absence of monitoring and inspection as well as the EU's lack of demands on the Armenian stakeholders, who receive the Union's development assistance and democracy support. These remarks were discussed in relation to EU-funded programs and the implementation of reforms, including key ones such as judicial and educational reforms.

Respondents also contended that, to fully achieve its potential, EU democracy support requires greater control and strictness.

Nearly all the participants mentioned the defence and security situation as one of the external factors threatening Armenian democracy, which hinders and slows any attempt at democratisation. Another concern is Armenia's reliance on and ties to Russia, as well as pro-Russian and pro-Azerbaijani proxies in the government, political parties and social organisations, which might follow illiberal practices and values.

Against the background of the current foreign policy turn, Armenia is well-positioned to further its democratisation record with the Union's support. All interviewed civil society representatives mentioned that the EU needs to push harder and enforce political conditionality, increase accountability of local beneficiaries and follow up on both successes and failures. It seems that the EU can finally push for a better democratisation record as part of the accession process. In terms of its domestic politics, Armenia is also well-positioned to undertake democratisation efforts more sustainably. Compared to its neighbours, Armenia has a relatively stable democratisation record and a vibrant civil society, which is key in ensuring successful democracy support. There is, however, an obvious need to revise democracy support approaches and move away from half-hearted efforts, both internally and externally. The EU is presently capable of offering more support, but this requires listening to local voices and ensuring the right bottom-up capacity-building for the country.

### 3.1.3 Policy Alternatives

The EU democracy support in Armenia might have an uneven record, but both actors are adapting their approaches and learning to collaborate in a mutually beneficial and respectful manner. In this section, we suggest ways to improve this relationship, particularly in supporting democratic practices and harnessing democratic knowledge. As Armenian foreign policy shifts towards the EU as a priority partner, the nearest future provides a unique window of opportunity to induce meaningful and positive changes.

EU democracy support has been a subject of much scholarly and public criticism. Most of the papers on EU democracy support in third countries devote considerable focus on identifying gaps, imperfections and other inadequacies (e.g., Sharshenova, 2018; Sadiki and Saleh. 2021). While democracy support is a sensitive, politicised and contested topic, it is also clear that it needs to be critically revised, reformed and updated. In this regard, we recommend that the EU enhances its democracy support practices by implementing a novel Democracy Learning Loop (DLL) approach, in which all parties engaged, would continuously learn from each other (and beyond) to increase their democratic knowledge in and through democratic practices.

The DLL was introduced by Sadiki and Saleh (2021) and developed further by our SHAPEDEM-EU colleagues Achrainer and Pace (2024). DLL is based on the concept of deep learning, a four-partite process, which includes performing practice, critically reflecting on practice, relating practice to background knowledge, and revising background knowledge. The operationalisation of the DLL in democracy support includes three interrelated loops. First, the EU needs to strive to improve its democracy support practices. Second, it needs to avoid contradictions between EU practices in different policy fields. Third, the EU ought to involve and assist its local partners and jointly build up democratic knowledge, learning from the local democratic practices too.

The need to listen to local grassroots stakeholders and learn from them was emphasised in all the interviews conducted and the reports consulted for this policy brief. Local respondents called to

reevaluate the hierarchy in EU-funded programs, encouraging reciprocal learning and appreciating local knowledge.

As a relatively young nation in a turbulent region, Armenia needs to be approached with due attitude and ability to offer responsive and respectful cooperation. This is something the EU has already learnt or is in the process of learning. The dynamics of EU-Armenia relations had to be revised in the aftermath of the 2013 watershed moment when the AA negotiations failed. The EU continued its policy evolution and strategic adaptation to the ever-evolving situation on the ground. The failure of the first AA led to a thorough reassessment of the EU's approach to Armenia and, eventually, to other partner countries under the Eastern Partnership. On a bilateral and international level, it may be argued that this prompted the development of a more tailored approach. The successor CEPA serves as an example of this strategic adaptability, showing how the EU can balance understanding partner nations' evolving complex geopolitical demands and issues with accomplishing relatively ambitious cooperation objectives. The EU needs to further consolidate and improve such adaptive and agile approach to its partners.

Armenian voices repeatedly called for more accountability and enforcement of political conditionality during SHAPEDEM-EU's lifetime. Many respondents in both focus groups and individual interviews expressed disapproval at the absence of monitoring and inspection as well as the EU's lack of demands on Armenia. These remarks were discussed in relation to EU-funded programs and the implementation of reforms, especially important ones like judicial and educational reforms. They complained that to fully fulfil the potential and guarantee that every effort is made to achieve the goal, greater control and actual enforcement of political conditionality are required. Based on these findings, the brief suggests increasing accountability of EU democracy support recipients in Armenia while applying political conditionality in a more consistent and decisive manner. This could be an appropriate time as there is a window of opportunity to push Armenian authorities a bit harder in the direction of democracy against the backdrop of their complex geopolitical situation.

Gender equality traditionally proves to be a challenging topic to incorporate and promote. However, the current Armenian government's ambition to deepen its relations with the EU might present a window of opportunity to further gender equality related initiatives. Gender equality should not be treated as a standalone initiative but could be incorporated into other collaborative areas. In this regard, it is important to focus on systemic gender issues through institutional collaboration, such as tackling unpaid care work and domestic violence in Armenia. Gender on its own remains a subject that is rather alien, politicised and sensitive even within civil society. For example, in focus group discussions, when asked about gender equality issues, the most detailed response received was a statement that 'Gender equality is a value in a democratic society'. For this reason, the EU should continue talking about gender equality and making it an integral part of its agenda. While it might face certain opposition on the ground, it could adopt an alternative solution, including the 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' approach (when one problematises an issue to set on the agenda of a public policy; see more in Bacchi 2012, p.21).

While the other four policy areas have emerged from past experiences, digital transformation looks prospectively into the future, to learn from it. Given the current extraordinary speed of development in digital technology, it is important to take this aspect into consideration when developing future policies. Other SHAPEDEM-EU research teams have already explored the relationship between democratic support, contestation and digital transformation in depth (Osypchuk et al., 2024).

Digital tools are viewed as 'neutral'; they may be utilized by both democratic and non-democratic regimes and could either enhance or destroy democratization processes. Democracies and democracy support are impacted by the digital revolution of public services, governance, civic participation and, more generally, daily social behaviours. The EU must think and plan ahead and ensure that digital transformations both domestically and internationally serve the interest of democracy support. In this regard, the EU should extend support to its neighbourhoods too, developing and sharing best practices in using digital transformation tools in the context of democracy support.

#### 3.1.4 Policy Recommendations

Taking into account the primary and secondary data consulted for this project, this brief would like to put forward five policy recommendations. Two of them pertain to streamlining specific topics (gender equality and digital transformation), while the remaining aim to enhance broader EU democracy support strategies.

1. Introduce and implement the **Democracy Learning Loop** mechanism by establishing and operationalising a streamlined process of democracy support practice, continuously checking for potential normative contradictions across EU policy fields and jointly building up democratic knowledge.
2. Develop an **adaptive and agile (resilience) approach** by speeding up communications and decision-making processes and consolidating in-depth background knowledge and understanding of the continuously changing local context in Armenia.
3. Enforce **political conditionality** and demand more **accountability** associated with EU development assistance vis-à-vis the state and non-state beneficiaries in Armenia. The EU needs to be more consistent with demanding accountability of both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders when it provides democracy assistance and to enforce political conditionality in a more decisive manner.
4. Streamline and problematise **gender equality** as an integral part of various cross-sectoral initiatives.
5. Plan ahead and analyse the current and potential impact of **digital transformation** tools on EU democracy support in Armenia.

### 3.2 Work Package 2 - Policy Brief on EU-Belarus Relations

#### 3.2.1 Executive Summary

Among all Eastern neighbourhood countries, Belarus is probably the most complex one for the EU to engage with due to the dictatorial nature of the current political regime. Dubbed as the last dictator in Europe, not only did Lukashenka eliminate any trace of political and civil freedoms in the country; he has also actively involved Belarus in Russian invasion of Ukraine. Both factors make any meaningful cooperation with the current political regime impossible for the EU without undermining its position on democratic principles and the Russian invasion.

This policy brief provides five policy recommendations based on extensive research on EU democracy support in Belarus. To produce these recommendations, both primary and secondary sources were consulted. Primary sources include original focus group discussions with Belarusian civil society representatives and independent journalists in exile.

### 3.2.2 Context/ Scope of Current Practices of Democracy (Support)

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Belarus has only ever had one president – Alyaksandr Lukashenka. For over thirty years, Lukashenko has built and consolidated a strong authoritarian regime (Freedom House, 2025), which is sometimes classified as the last dictatorship in Europe (BBC News, 2001). In 2020, Belarus experienced significant political upheaval centred around the presidential election held on August 9. The election saw incumbent Alexander Lukashenka allegedly claiming a landslide victory, officially securing about 80% of the vote. This result was widely contested by opposition groups and the public, leading to allegations of widespread electoral fraud. The main opposition candidate, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, claimed she had won around 60-70% of the votes.

Following the announcement of the election results, mass protests erupted across Belarus. These were some of the largest demonstrations in the country's history, with hundreds of thousands participating, across the entire country. The protests were peaceful, calling for fair elections, the release of political prisoners and the resignation of Lukashenko. The Belarusian government responded with a brutal crackdown. Security forces used tactics like tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons to disperse crowds. There were numerous reports of arbitrary arrests, torture and ill-treatment of detainees. Over the weeks following the election, thousands were detained and subsequently tortured. This resulted in nearly 50,000 incarcerations, and just under 2,000 political prisoners, many of whom held incommunicado for over 2 years.

The international community, including the EU, criticised the election process and the subsequent violence against protesters. Several rounds of sanctions were imposed on Belarusian officials. In response to the crackdown, the opposition formed the Coordination Council to negotiate a peaceful transfer of power. This was led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who was forced to flee to Lithuania for safety. The Council aimed to establish a dialogue with the government, but it was not recognised by Lukashenka's administration, which instead intensified its control and repression.

The protests, coupled with subsequent political instability and international isolation, have had significant socio-economic repercussions on the country, with strikes at major state enterprises and a notable exodus of people from Belarus. As a result of repression, nearly 1.5 million Belarusians had to flee the country, including civil society representatives, independent journalists and academics who find themselves in exile, mostly in Europe. To continue resisting the Lukashenka regime, they organised themselves into the United Transition Cabinet (UTC) as a permanent executive body established by the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and People's Embassies across the world. More recently, in response to Lukashenka's unrecognised election on 26 February 2025, a Platform 2025 was created, to offer the common vision and framework for more coordinated action, and a joint list of priorities agreed by democratic forces.

Despite the harsh crackdown, elements of resistance continue to persist inside the country through various forms like solidarity chains, flash mobs, online activism and (cyber-) partisan movements. However, the momentum for change waned over time due to the repression, leading to a period of increased authoritarian control rather than democratic transition.

The EU relations with Belarus reflect the deterioration of the political situation under Lukashenka's regime. The EU institutions have expressed concerns about each wave of political repressions. After February 2022 and Lukashenka's active involvement in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU has also imposed individual and collective sanctions on trade and other activities (European Council, 2024), which are linked to the wider Russia sanctions.

The current EU policy toward Belarus is based on the Council's conclusions of 19th February 2024, which reaffirmed the EU's unwavering support for the Belarusian people's aspiration for a free, democratic, sovereign and independent Belarus as part of a peaceful and prosperous Europe. The Council's findings expressed its continued and serious concern about the deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus as well as the ongoing campaigns of intimidation and persecution against all groups of Belarusian society. The EU has also declared its commitment to allocate three billion euros to support a future democratic Belarus, which signifies an important slight shift in the EU's approach to Belarus.

The EU is already involved in a number of democracy support initiatives as well as working on such cross-sectoral issues as gender equality. The "EU4Gender Equality: Together Against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Based Violence" program is one of the major regional activities in this area. The program's first phase ran from 2020 to 2023, while its second phase began in 2024 and will conclude in 2026. The EU contributed 7.5 million euros to its execution in 2020–2023, and 5 million euros in 2023–2026. In the six Eastern Partnership countries, UN Women and UNFPA work together to implement this initiative. Its goal is to lessen gender biased attitudes and behaviours, such as unpaid care and domestic chores, between men and women in institutional and communal settings.

### 3.2.3 Policy Alternatives

The situation in Belarus is such that any, even superficial and non-political, engagement in the country could be dangerous for local respondents. For this reason, the SHAPEDEM-EU's WP2 only held focus group discussions with Belarusians in exile, who find themselves in safer conditions away from Lukashenka's regime. All discussions were held confidentially and the identity of those involved was concealed even from the WP2 researchers to ensure safety of the respondents. These focus group discussions provided some important insights into perceptions of democracy and democracy support in Belarus.

First, there is a consensus about the current threats to democracy in Belarus. Most respondents named Lukashenka as the main internal threat to democracy and Russia under President Putin as the key external threat. Belarusian dependence on Russia is deeply rooted in the Soviet past and the increasing isolation of the country due to the dictatorial and inward-looking nature of its current political regime. Second, there is a diversity of perceptions on what democracy is and how it should be reached. While respondents generally agree that democracy is a much-desired objective, there are different opinions on what constitutes democracy. Third, personal interviews revealed a shared understanding that the future of Belarus is European.

At that, there is a very sober approach to the EU - without any illusion that democracy could be imposed from outside or that democracy is abundant in the EU itself. Most respondents think that the EU should not be blamed for democracy-building failures. Some believe that the presence and efforts of the EU are the only factor giving them hope for a possible democracy in Belarus.

Against the background of this complex local context and challenging EU-Belarus relations at present, it is particularly important to identify, map and engage with the existing and potential democratic forces of Belarus. Unfortunately, due to the ongoing political repressions, only diaspora communities and networks are available for direct engagement. This does not mean that there are no pro-democratic forces within Belarus, but working with them is less than possible while Lukashenko is in power. For this reason, the EU must find ways of providing access to unbiased information in the country as well as supporting civic activism where possible, to counteract Lukashenka's disinformation campaign.

While the EU demonstrates a degree of commitment to supporting a democratic Belarus in the future, it needs to take a more proactive approach and engage in developing a more defined strategy towards Belarus. So far, the EU has been largely reactive to extreme cases of power abuse by the Lukashenka regime, such as the violent clampdown of peaceful protests in 2020. A lack of specific and decisive actions to hold Lukashenka and his top management accountable for committed crimes will only imply perpetuation of same crimes. The EU should develop a practical, step-by-step strategy designed to hold Lukashenko accountable and build the capacity of democratic alternatives for Belarus.

As Belarus faces extreme cases of political oppression, gender equality is sometimes seen as less important against the background of the overall dire human rights violations. In this regard, the current political regime is quite indiscriminate in who and how they oppress. Therefore, gender equality in Belarus presents a complex picture with both progress and persistent challenges. On one hand, Belarus has ratified several international documents on gender equality and is a party to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The country has established national action plans aimed at promoting gender equality, focusing on socioeconomic aspects, reproductive health, gender education and domestic violence prevention. However, there's criticism about the lack of specific laws directly addressing gender equality, such as a comprehensive gender equality law. In the area of political representation, there has been an increase in women's representation in politics. Yet, women's political participation is often seen as tokenistic, with appointments being more about loyalty to the regime than an attempt to promote genuine equality. In terms of cultural and societal norms, the current political regime is quite conservative with a strong focus on traditional family values, which limit women's participation in political and societal life. Given the need to build democracy from its foundations after Lukashenka's regime, the EU should support incorporating gender equality principles early on. While such initiatives as EU4Gender Equality are of extreme importance, it is necessary to sustain a deeper level of engagement.

Belarusian authorities actively use digital tools to consolidate the authoritarian regime and enforce digital surveillance. This includes creating a network of pro-government Telegram groups, disseminating misleading information about opposition leaders, using a complex mechanism to shut down the Internet, and enforcing stricter laws to further control the Internet (Rudnik, 2024). This use of digital transformation tools needs to be countered through tackling misinformation, disinformation and propaganda, and protecting civil society activists from surveillance.

### 3.2.4 Policy Recommendations

Belarus offers an unprecedented challenge for external democracy support agents as it represents the 'last dictatorship in Europe'. Engaging with the political regime in the country is both complicated and important to ensure the release of its political prisoners and stop repressions. This brief provides four policy recommendations based on the primary and secondary data studied under this research project. Three of them seek to strengthen EU democratic support in Belarus, while the remaining deal with cross-sectoral thematic issues of gender equality and digital transformation.

1. Establish and operationalise a streamlined procedure for participating in a democracy support practice, continuously look for potential normative inconsistencies across EU policy sectors and collaboratively increase democratic knowledge to introduce and implement the **Democracy Learning Loop** mechanism.
2. **Proactive engagement**: Lukashenka's regime is beyond redemption and should be treated as an illegitimate one. Given this, the EU must identify an alternative polity to cooperate with and focus

its efforts on helping Belarusians consolidate legitimate and pro-democratic political forces through training and capacity building.

3. Incorporate **gender equality** as an integral part of any EU engagement with Belarusian stakeholders and make it an essential part of a more in-depth EU strategy towards Belarus.
4. Take stock of the EU's digital transformation tools and explore the possibilities of applying **digital transformation** tools to EU democracy support in Belarus.

## 3.3 Work Package 2 – Policy Brief on EU-Ukraine Relations

### 3.3.1 Executive Summary

The EU's relations with Ukraine have undergone considerable transformations since 1991. In the first two decades of the post-Soviet existence, the country's political leadership was simultaneously courting Moscow and Brussels. Yet, during the last decade, dominated by Russian military aggression, Ukraine's leaders and the vast majority of its population chose a European future. Since the Orange Revolution of 2004, Ukraine has been on course to improve its democracy and earn a place inside the EU. Despite initial hesitation and resistance, the bloc accepted Ukraine's integration ambitions and opened membership negotiations in 2024, two years after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion. By opening the membership path to Ukraine, the EU has strengthened its position as an actor of democracy support (DS) in the country.

Having conducted representative surveys and focus groups in Ukraine, this policy brief offers the following five policy recommendations: 1) to introduce and implement **Democracy Learning Loop,** which would allow the EU to consistently learn from local actors; 2) **to prioritise education** for all categories of the Ukrainian society, especially **in the fields of disinformation, political activity and war-related restrictions on democracy**; 3) to ensure that Ukraine's democracy is strengthened in conditions of **war and post-war recovery** through projects dealing with **wartime experiences of the youth**, who have grown up in the conditions of limited democracy (e.g. disrupted electoral processes) and the **promotion of dialogue between different groups of society to avoid polarisation;** 4) to make **gender equality** an integral part of EU engagement with Ukrainian stakeholders, with a special **focus on LGBTQ+ and inclusion**; and 5) to apply **digital transformation** tools to EU democracy support in Ukraine for (a) strengthening institutions and eradicating non-democratic practices, e.g. corruption; and (b) countering disinformation and propaganda.

### 3.3.2 Context/ Scope of Current Democracy Support Practices (DS)

Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has been slowly but unmistakably moving in the direction of functional democracy (Snyder, 2022). In the first two decades of the post-Soviet existence, the country's political elite was simultaneously courting Moscow and Brussels. However, in the past decade, dominated by Russian military aggression, Ukraine's leaders and the vast majority of its population chose a European future (NDI, 2022). Remarkably, the EU recognised this ambition as legitimate by granting Ukraine official candidate membership status on the 23$^{rd}$ of June 2022 through unanimous agreement between the leaders of all 27 EU Member States (European Council, 2022). The decision is remarkable for at least two reasons. First, it was taken in the midst of the full-scale war that followed the Russian invasion on the 24$^{th}$ of February 2022. Second, it officially opened the membership perspective to Ukraine and other countries of the European Neighbourhood Policy, which the EU had previously insisted did not offer integration into the bloc.

By opening the membership path to Ukraine, the European Union has strengthened its position as an actor of DS in the country. Yet, while Ukraine continues to reform its institutions and address systemic

grievances, at the time of writing, it is and has been for over a decade a country at war. The EU, therefore, needs to carefully balance its wartime support with accession talks and plans for postwar recovery (Onuch, 2024). Considering that the nation's support for EU membership and its determination to resist the Russian aggression have been underpinned by strong commitment to the value of democracy (ibid), now is the perfect opportunity for the EU to incorporate DS into all key areas of cooperation with Ukraine.

Formally, Ukraine has committed to European integration since the early 1990s, at a time when this was not on the EU agenda. Yet, while being vocal about Ukraine's EU future, the country's leadership pursued the so called "multi-vector policy", trying to balance Ukraine's relations with the EU (and the US) alongside that with Russia. At the same time, there was not enough perceived interest in or knowledge of the EU among the Ukrainian population until the Orange Revolution (Kubicek, 2005). The 2004 electoral protests established Ukraine's democratic credentials and set it on a path divergent from Russia's authoritarianism (Dickinson, 2020). Unfortunately, the infighting that followed among Ukrainian politicians and the EU's hesitance to show commitment to Ukraine prevented the country from getting closer to the bloc.

It took nearly a decade for Ukraine to reach the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU, which promised a qualitatively new form of relations on the principles of political association and economic integration. President Yanukovych's decision to walk away from signing the AA in November 2013 sparked the Euromaidan, now better known in Ukraine as the Revolution of Dignity. In the aftermath of the revolution, in 2014, the AA was signed and ratified. Ukraine interpreted this as "a step towards ultimate goal of the European integration – full membership of Ukraine in the European Union" (MFA, 2021). However, the EU offered no such promises. On the contrary, in 2016, the Union sought to clarify that the AA did not offer Ukraine a membership perspective or security guarantees (Sologub, 2022).

During the 2010s, relations with Russia worsened, particularly after its annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas. But it was not until soon after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 that the EU finally recognised Ukraine's European aspirations and accepted its formal membership application. The accession negotiations opened in June 2024. The prospect of EU membership has played an important part in Ukraine's fight for independence, as Ukrainians increasingly see the EU as a community of shared democratic principles (Onuch, 2024) and future in the bloc as part of "the good life", one of the cornerstones of Ukrainian resilience (Kudlenko, 2023). The EU-Ukraine relations have therefore gone through a tremendous transformation in their 34–year history. Drastic changes have occurred when the Ukrainian nation chose democracy over authoritarianism. The democratisation of Ukraine, however, is not finished and now the EU's role is more important than ever.

The foundations for EU-Ukraine relations overall and DS in particular were laid out in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), signed in 1994. Unfortunately, the EU used the framework predominantly for facilitating trade (Kubicek, 2005). While some efforts were made to encourage democratisation before the Orange Revolution, observers treat this period as rather weak in terms of DS. The introduction of the EU-Ukraine Action Plan in 2005 created new opportunities for Ukrainian democracy as the EU started playing a more active role in supporting civil society and fostering a range of institutional reforms, aimed at strengthening democracy in the country. The AA, signed in 2014 and entered into force in 2017, put an even bigger emphasis on the country's democratization. Nonetheless, until the start of membership negotiations, EU DS efforts were disjointed and lacked effective mechanisms of enforcement.

Despite early difficulties, Ukrainians value EU's role in democracy support. This brief suggests some policies the EU could consider adopting to strengthen its position as a democracy support actor in the area. Our recommendations are based on the analysis of secondary and primary data collected within SHAPEDEM-EU through national surveys (except for the occupied areas) in 2023 and focus groups in 2024. Our focus groups revealed the importance of EU democratization efforts for civil society and the media. Nonetheless, our data also showed dissatisfaction with the EU's performance. Some focus groups participants in Ukraine believed that the EU lacked practicality and often used an overly abstract rhetoric, avoiding precise examples and clear-cut issues. Respondents observed a lack of unity among EU countries in terms of values. This brief outlines five areas of DS where the EU can improve its performance.

### 3.3.3 Policy Alternatives

EU democracy support practices in Ukraine have long been under-prioritised in practice, despite the emphasis on democratisation in rhetoric. Often, the EU reacted to developments in Ukraine, by responding to local demands hastily and in an uncoordinated manner. To avoid past mistakes, this brief recommends five policy alternatives that the EU could implement to improve its record of DS in Ukraine.

Ukrainian civil society, the media and state institutions have benefited from many EU projects and programmes. Our focus groups saw the involvement of Ukrainian representatives in European cultural, educational and scientific institutions as an important area of democracy support. Reliable partnerships can be built through the exchange of experience between Ukraine and the EU, bringing mutual benefits and strengthening democracy in Ukraine, the EU and its MS. This is why our first recommendation is that the EU implements a novel DLL approach, which presupposes that all parties engaged in DS continuously learn from each other (and beyond) to increase their democratic knowledge in and through democratic practices.

The DLL was introduced by Sadiki and Saleh (2021) and developed within SHAPEDEM-EU by Achrainer and Pace (2024). The DLL is based on the concept of deep learning, a four-partite process that includes performing practice, critically reflecting on practice, relating practice to background knowledge, and revising background knowledge. The operationalisation of the DLL in democracy support includes three inter-related loops. First, the EU needs to improve its democracy support practices by **learning to listen to local actors** - adjusting its policies through constant reflection. Second, it needs to **avoid contradictions between EU practices in different policy fields**. Third, the EU ought to strive for the **development of partnerships with local actors**, jointly building up democratic knowledge in the country.

Ukrainian society has shown incredible bravery and resilience in the face of the Russian aggression. Its **self-organisation** has been particularly noticeable, which is why it should be one of the areas covered through DLL. The EU is specifically encouraged to include broader Ukrainian civil society in its DLL practices, going beyond traditional non-governmental organisations.

Ukraine has been on the receiving end of Russian propaganda for decades. Our data highlighted the threats of disinformation and populism to democracy in Ukraine. Focus groups participants saw education as an important antidote to many threats. Education was mentioned in all Ukrainian FGs as an important element in supporting democratic practices. In general, respondents saw a great and urgent need to provide education to different categories of Ukrainians using diverse educational formats. They also identified education as a key method for improving society's involvement in politics.

There is scope for the EU to support educational initiatives at different levels in Ukraine, especially those aimed at **improving the media literacy of Ukrainians, strengthening their ability to identify disinformation, and overcoming political passivity linked to the Soviet legacy. They can also address the war's impact on democracy, ensuring these constraints are not accepted as normal, in particular by younger generations.** Prioritising education could allow the EU to further improve its relationship with Ukraine and the understanding of the bloc in the country.

Russia's full-scale invasion has sparked a societal response in Ukraine. Nonetheless, the longer the war goes on, the more divisions might appear in the country. Our respondents identified the possibility of polarisation, including Russian attempts to create division, as a danger of the war and post-war period. The EU should direct its DS at **strengthening social cohesion and promoting dialogue between different groups.** The war has traumatised the Ukrainian population in many ways. According to respondents, many Ukrainians need psychological rehabilitation. Without adequate support, society risks experiencing social conflicts. In addition, the war has a disproportionately detrimental effect on young people. Growing up during martial law, **young Ukrainians** have observed limited democracy. It is important they do not accept these limitations as a norm. In addition, educational opportunities could help bring back young people who left the country during the war and even attract foreigners, thus stimulating incoming migration, essential for Ukraine's reconstruction.

In Ukraine, gender equality and gender rights are understood and interpreted in a much wider sense than just women's rights and equality. Unlike in other ENP countries, Ukrainian participants, when asked about gender equality, focused on **equal rights for LGBTQ+ people** and the question of civil partnerships, which is still unresolved in Ukraine. Focus groups participants also stressed the need for mediated dialogue and more understanding between groups with polar ideologies and stances through democracy support programmes in Ukraine. Here one of the examples provided was the discussions and clashes around and during the Pride in Kyiv each June. **Gender equality is about inclusion, which is of utmost importance for democracy support.**

Modern technology is an important tool for democratisation in Ukraine. According to respondents of our focus groups, it can **provide transparency in political processes, help fight corruption and provide educational opportunities**, identified as important methods of ensuring democratic practices. Technology can play a key role in establishing and sustaining democracy, but only if it is used in a way that respects democratic principles. Otherwise, technology can be destructive to a democratic society. For example, respondents said that technology can be used to spread disinformation, including through the use of artificial intelligence to generate photos and videos. The EU should use digital transformation to address both sides of modern technology use in democracies: **1) as a tool for strengthening institutions and eradicating non-democratic practices, e.g. corruption; and 2) as a tool for countering disinformation and propaganda**.

None of the identified policy alternatives is sufficient on its own to improve the EU's work on democracy support in Ukraine. They are closely intertwined and are advised to be implemented alongside each other to achieve desirable results for the EU and Ukraine.

### 3.3.4 Policy Recommendations

This policy brief proposes five policy recommendations based on the primary and secondary data studied under SHAPEDEM-EU. Three of them seek to strengthen EU democratic support in Ukraine, while two of them deal with the thematic issues of gender equality and digital transformation:

1. Introduce and implement the **Democracy Learning Loop** by establishing and operationalising a streamlined process of engaging in democracy support practices with all key stakeholders, continuously checking for potential normative contradictions across EU policy fields and jointly building up democratic knowledge.
2. **Prioritise education** of all categories of Ukrainian society using different educational formats to support further development of democratic practices in the country and public involvement in the political process. Special focus should be given to educational initiatives countering disinformation, decreasing political passivity and addressing war-related restrictions on democracy.
3. Ensure that Ukraine's democracy is strengthened even in conditions of war through the implementation of **war and post-war support** projects, specifically dealing with wartime experiences of the youth who have grown up in conditions of limited democracy (e.g. disrupted electoral processes), and the promotion of dialogue between different groups of society to avoid polarisation.
4. Make **gender equality** an integral part of EU engagement with Ukrainian stakeholders, with a special focus on LGBTQ+ and inclusion.
5. Take stock of the EU's digital transformation tools and explore possibilities to apply **digital transformation** to EU democracy support in Ukraine by addressing both sides of modern technology: 1) as a tool for strengthening institutions and eradicating non-democratic practices, e.g. corruption; and 2) as a tool for countering disinformation and propaganda.

## 3.4 Work Package 3 – Policy Brief on the Southern Neighbourhood

### 3.4.1 Executive Summary

This policy brief presents key recommendations for the EU to recalibrate its democracy support in the Southern neighbourhood. Conducted within the framework of the SHAPEDEM-EU project, it is based on extensive research in Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia that resulted in three reports.[1] This Brief's main objective is to critically engage with 'democracy support programs' as a contested international practice. It does so by exploring how local adaptation and contestation to such programs and their effects are often expressed. It draws from engagement with a wide range of actors— including policy-makers, grassroots organisations, civil society groups, syndicates, journalists and youth-led initiatives—through focus groups, in-depth interviews and a validation workshop all conducted between 2023 and 2025.

Findings reveal a fundamental disconnect between EU's declared objectives for democracy support and local perceptions. We find that EU engagement is widely perceived as transactional, inconsistent, and subordinated to its own geopolitical interests, particularly migration management, strong support for Israel, and its own understanding of short-term stability that is contested locally. The EU's approach has undermined trust in the region and significantly reduced its credibility as an actor advocating democracy and human rights, particularly in the aftermath of its role in the Gaza genocide and resurgence of authoritarianism in Tunisia.

This Brief calls for a fundamental shift from a top-down, crisis-management model to a more principled, participatory and transparent approach. Proposed actions include rethinking funding mechanisms to empower grassroots actors, dismantling gatekeeping structures that block meaningful dialogue, and confronting double standards through consistent and universal application of

[1] The three reports on Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia were written by Rima Rassi, Zeina Jallad and Zouhour Ouamara respectively under the overall supervision of the AUB team's primary investigators

international law and human rights norms, and the acceptance democratic processes and results that are deemed legitimate by international standards.

Taken together, these steps can lay the foundation for an inclusive "bottom-up democracy learning loop" that makes EU democracy support programs more legitimate, effective, and responsive.

### 3.4.2 Context and Scope of Current Practices of Democracy Support

Democracy Support has long been a declared objective of the European Union's engagement in its Southern neighbourhood. Yet, local perspectives gathered through the SHAPEDEM-EU project reveal a fundamental misalignment between EU's stated intent and local perceptions. Through extensive fieldwork—via focus groups, interviews and a validation workshop—actors such as civil society organisations (CSOs), grassroots initiatives, syndicates, journalists, youth movements and women's groups shared their experiences of EU democracy support in the cases of Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia, respectively. The starting point for our work is that these actors are not passive recipients of Western aid but active shapers of democratic knowledge and practice in their respective political and socio-economic contexts.

The practices they embody—participation, accountability and inclusiveness—are essential to building democratic societies. However, their interaction with EU democracy support programs is often mediated through restrictive funding frameworks, gatekeepers and political trade-offs that undermine these very practices. Rather than empowering local agency, EU interventions frequently constrain it. This section highlights the role of these actors and their democratic practices, showing why a recalibration of EU democracy support is urgently needed and why new tools are required to bridge the gap between EU rhetoric, on the one hand, and local realities within the context of persistent international intervention on the other.

In the case of **Lebanon**, local actors include a diverse civil society that ranges from professionalised NGOs to grassroots protest movements, journalists and emerging political groups. Their practices in the area of democracy align with stated EU policy, centring on accountability, anti-corruption advocacy and demands for inclusive participation. However, these actors describe EU support as heavily skewed towards crisis management, often reinforcing elite interests' desire to hold on to power, as well as on well-known gatekeepers.

EU funding mechanisms, widely regarded in Lebanon as the most complex and exclusionary procedures, privilege established NGOs with technical expertise, sidelining smaller grassroots groups who sometimes want to change the status quo. This fosters the phenomenon of "NGOisation," where democratic practices are narrowed to technical service delivery rather than encompassing transformative political action. As a result, the democratic role of grassroots actors—those most capable of mobilising for change—is diminished; while other more consolidated groups are further endorsed and established.

Local stakeholders in Lebanon also emphasize how EU reliance on gatekeepers, such as entrenched elites and third-party implementers, insulates the EU from direct accountability or productive democratic loop processes. This diminishes opportunities for dialogue, weakens the democratic practice of participation and deepens cynicism. The €1 billion EU migration -linked package of May 2024 epitomised this transactional approach, prioritising border management over reform. For many actors, such deals legitimate the very elites responsible for Lebanon's predicament.

Lebanon's experience illustrates the urgent need for new EU tools: simplified and accessible funding channels, institutionalised consultation platforms and conditionality linking aid to governments to reform.

**Palestinian actors**—youth groups, women's organisations, syndicates, unions and human rights organisations— define democracy through practices of resistance, self-determination, accountability and resilience. Yet EU support is widely perceived as complicit in occupation, apartheid and genocide. Our research exposes how democratic practices are perceived as systematically undermined by EU-imposed "anti-terror" clauses, which force civil society organisations to vet beneficiaries against Israeli "terror" lists. Civil society organisations are thus trapped between national commitments (recognised right of the Palestinian people for self-determination and the imperatives of securing funding from the EU that submits to Israeli vetting rules and the realities of occupation).

Furthermore, our research reveals how EU funding encourages de-politicised projects framed around "dialogue" and "coexistence," which neglect the structural reality of occupation and apartheid. Such programming commodifies democratic practices, steering Palestinian organisations away from political engagement and reducing them to service providers for donor agendas. For actors rooted in communities facing dispossession and violence, this depoliticization delegitimises their work and reduces its effectiveness.

We find that the democratic practice of inclusiveness is also distorted. By privileging engagement with the Palestinian Authority (PA)—a body widely seen among Palestinians as limited in representation and accountability, and beholden to external interests—the EU de facto marginalises a wide spectrum of Palestinian actors. The Gaza genocide further entrenched perceptions of double standards and collusion, as EU responses contrasted sharply with its principled stance on Ukraine.

In Palestine, the necessity for new EU tools is acute and foundational. Removing punitive conditionalities, re-centring occupation as the main obstacle to democracy, diversifying partnerships beyond the PA, and aligning with international law are essential to restoring credibility and supporting genuine democratic practices.

**Tunisian actors** such as independent journalists, human rights defenders, youth activists and alternative political movements played a central role in the democratic opening after 2011. Their practices emphasised inclusiveness, participation and advocacy for institutional reform. Our findings show that while the EU initially supported these practices robustly, its stance shifted markedly since President Kais Saied's power consolidation in 2021 in order to protect perceived EU interests.

The 2023 Memorandum of Understanding on migration crystallised the perception that EU democracy support is transactional. By linking cooperation on border control with financial aid, the EU appeared to legitimise authoritarian regression in exchange for reduced migration flows. Civil society actors describe this as abandonment at a critical moment when democratic practices were most threatened.

Moreover, our research shows that EU mechanisms fail to recognise emerging, informal youth-led movements that do not fit traditional NGO models. These movements represent innovative forms of participation and inclusiveness, yet they remain invisible to donor frameworks. The absence of support for such actors narrows the democratic space and undermines the transformative potential of activism.

For Tunisia, we find that new EU tools must include suspension of migration deals that undermine democratic benchmarks, stronger conditionality in political support, and micro-funding tailored to

informal movements. These steps are essential to rebuild trust and re-legitimise EU democracy support in a time where such support is more needed than ever.

### 3.4.3 Comparative Dynamics: Systemic Patterns of Democratic Erosion

Across Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia, common patterns emerge. Actors emphasise that the EU's engagement is perceived as transactional, prioritising migration control, security and energy interests. This undermines democratic support programs by subordinating them to external agendas.

The practice of advocacy is restricted by funding frameworks that favour apolitical service delivery. Participation is constrained by gatekeepers who filter communication between the EU and civil society. Inclusiveness is undermined by the EU's preference for predictable interlocutors, leaving youth and grassroots voices excluded. We find that accountability is weakened by double standards, as the EU applies international law selectively, with Palestine being the most striking example of EU failure in this regard.

These patterns and practices illustrate why the current EU model cannot sustain legitimacy as democratic support provider. Without fundamental rethinking and reconsideration, the EU risks perpetuating elite capture, authoritarian regression and complicity in occupation and apartheid. We find that since the EU is not seen as a credible interlocutor by independent local actors, it risks losing "local" interlocutors due to growing cynicism.

The evidence from all three contexts makes clear that the EU must fundamentally reconfigure its democracy support if it seeks to regain legitimacy and trust. Our research show that new tools are necessary to align EU policies once again with democratic practices. These include:

- Simplified and accessible funding to empower grassroots actors and counter NGOisation.
- Institutionalised consultation platforms that guarantee participation and inclusiveness across diverse local voices.
- Consistent conditionality that ties aid and cooperation to accountability and reform, rather than transactional deals.
- Uniform application of international law and human rights practices to address double standards and restore credibility.

By adopting these tools, the EU can transition from a donor perceived as complicit in maintaining the harmful status quo (in Lebanon), retrenchment of authoritarianism (in Tunisia) and occupation and apartheid (in the case of Palestine) to a partner that supports genuine democratic transformation. This requires moving beyond rhetoric to practice, creating an environment where local democratic actors can exercise advocacy, inclusiveness, participation, and accountability on their own terms. The ultimate goal is to establish a "bottom-up democracy learning loop" in which local knowledge shapes EU policies, ensuring they are more effective, legitimate and responsive.

### 3.4.4 Policy Alternatives

The EU faces choices in how it wants to engage with the Southern Neighbourhood moving forward. This section proposes three main paths for structuring its democracy support in the Southern neighbourhood. Each is assessed in relation to its potential to strengthen or undermine democratic practices and local knowledge.

**Alternative 1: Incremental Reform of Existing Frameworks**

One option is to retain the current EU democracy support architecture but improve it through modest technical reforms. This could include simplifying grant applications, providing more capacity-building for local organisations, or marginally increasing funding for advocacy initiatives. Incremental adjustments would preserve institutional continuity and avoid political disruption in relations with partner governments. However, such reforms would leave the deeper structural issues unresolved. Funding would likely remain dominated by established NGOs, continuing the trend of NGOisation. Grassroots movements and informal activism, which often generate innovative forms of participation and accountability, would still be excluded. Gatekeeping by elites, experts and implementing partners would persist, and conditionality would remain inconsistently applied. For democratic practices, this path offers limited gains. Participation may expand slightly through easier access to grants, but advocacy, inclusiveness and accountability would remain constrained. The credibility gap identified by local actors would likely deepen, as incrementalism would be seen as cosmetic rather than substantive change.

**Alternative 2: Prioritisation of Security and Stability**

A second option is to openly prioritise security, migration management, and short-term stability as the EU's primary objectives in the Southern Neighbourhood, relegating democracy support to a secondary concern. This approach reflects practices already visible in Lebanon and Tunisia, where large aid packages are tied to border control or crisis management. It would formalise a strategy where democratic support becomes instrumental to geopolitical goals rather than a goal in itself. T

his option might provide short-term policy coherence, aligning rhetoric with practice. It could also appeal to member states more concerned with domestic political pressures linked to migration or energy security. Yet, the costs to democratic practices are profound. Participation and accountability would be further marginalised, as EU resources and political capital would be channelled towards reinforcing state structures, regardless of their democratic credentials. Inclusiveness and participation would shrink, as grassroots voices would be excluded in favour of reliable state partners. Knowledge produced by local actors would be disregarded, replaced by donor-driven agendas. For many in Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia, such an approach would confirm the EU's complicity in authoritarianism, occupation, and elite capture. Legitimacy, already fragile, would erode further undermining the EU's long-term influence in the region.

**Alternative 3: Rights-Based Reorientation of Democracy Support**

A third pathway is a principled shift towards a rights-based model of democracy support. Under this approach, the EU would foreground democratic practices—participation, accountability inclusiveness—as intrinsic goals rather than secondary to security or migration concerns. This model would draw directly on the democratic knowledge of local actors, treating them as equal partners rather than implementers of donor agendas. Key elements would include reforming funding to empower grassroots and informal movements, abolishing punitive conditionalities that undermine credibility (particularly in Palestine), institutionalising direct consultations and dialogues with a diverse spectrum of actors, and applying international law consistently across contexts.

Instead of contributing to the depoliticization of civil society, EU support would recognise the inherently political nature of democratic struggle, whether against elite capture, authoritarian regression or occupation. The strength of this alternative lies in its capacity to rebuild trust and legitimacy. Participation and inclusiveness would expand through more accessible funding and direct consultation. After all, this would allow the EU to adapt and adjust its programs to local needs rather

than aligning primarily with elite interests, let alone its own one. The main challenge is political will. A rights-based reorientation requires the EU to confront partners, including Israel and authoritarian governments, with accountability measures that may strain diplomatic and economic relations. It demands courage to prioritise values where they conflict with short-term interests.

Evaluating these alternatives against the democratic practices under investigation provides clarity. Incremental reform offers too little change to address structural grievances. Prioritising security and stability risks eroding trust entirely, undermining all democratic practices. By contrast, the rights-based reorientation directly addresses the grievances identified by local actors and empowers the practices they emphasise: advocacy, inclusiveness, accountability and participation. It transforms democratic knowledge from being filtered through donor agendas into a foundation for EU engagement. Though politically demanding, it offers a credible path to restoring legitimacy and aligning EU action with its founding values.

The rights-based approach is not only desirable but necessary. It offers a way to create what the SHAPEDEM-EU project terms a "bottom-up democracy learning loop." This model recognises that local actors generate knowledge about democracy through their struggles for participation, accountability and justice. EU support should not overwrite this knowledge with technical templates but integrate it into policy design.

Through simplified funding, inclusive consultations, consistent conditionality and uniform application of international law, the EU can move from being perceived as a distant donor to becoming a responsive partner. This shift would not only restore credibility but also produce more resilient, equitable and context-sensitive democratic practices across the Southern neighbourhood.

### 3.4.5 Policy Recommendations

**General Recommendations for EU's Southern Neighbourhood:**

1. Rethink funding architecture to empower grassroots democracy: Establish simplified and fast-track funding channels for grassroots, women-led and youth-led organisations. Dedicate budget lines for advocacy, lobbying, and digital civic initiatives, with multi-year flexible support to reduce dependency on short-term projects. This addresses NGOisation and ensures inclusiveness in democratic practices
2. Institutionalise inclusive consultation mechanisms: Ask EU Delegations in Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia to convene regular, transparent dialogues with diverse actors—including independent activists, syndicates, women's groups and digital innovators—beyond traditional elites and large NGOs. These consultations can feed directly into EU programming, with public reporting on how input is integrated into strategy
3. Apply consistent conditionality in aid, trade and migration agreements: Link large-scale financial assistance and cooperation agreements (including energy and migration deals) to verifiable progress on democratic governance, anti-corruption reforms, and human rights. Independent monitoring bodies should oversee compliance and ensure that EU resources do not reinforce elite capture or authoritarian regression

**Recommendations for Lebanon:**

1. Support local actors more effectively by reconsidering a move away from its current reactive, crisis-management footing to a more proactive, politically principled strategy that is willing to support a broader base of civil society actors disrupt the status quo.

2. Fundamentally reconsider its funding architecture for Lebanon, allocating a significant portion of the democracy support budget to flexible, multi-year core funding. This in turn empowers organisations to set their own strategic agendas
3. Establish within the EU Delegation in Lebanon a formal, regular, and institutionalised consultation mechanism that engages directly with a diverse and representative spectrum of civil society actors.

**Recommendations for Palestine:**

1. Undertake a fundamental and principled reorientation of its entire approach, moving from a paradigm of conflict management to one of rights-based justice and accountability.
2. Abolish all punitive political conditionalities from all funding agreements in Palestine and replace with clear commitment to established principles of international humanitarian law and universal human rights practices.
3. Take urgent steps to reframe both the conceptual and practice of its democracy support programs to explicitly acknowledge the political context of occupation and support local initiatives aimed at accountability, justice and self-determination without which democracy cannot work.
4. Integrate fully the challenge to the occupation into the very core of its democracy support strategy and strategically diversify its partnerships beyond the PA to include a much wider and more representative range of actors in Palestinian civil and political society.

**Recommendations for Tunisia:**

1. Re-engage in a genuine tripartite dialogue (EU, governments and civil society) to determine the most appropriate forms of support, rather than arriving with prepackaged or imposed projects.
2. Keep democracy support and collaboration away from political biases linked to issues such as migration, conflicts or authoritarian regimes.
3. Build a narrative centered on youth inclusion in the democratic process, with strategies that specifically take into account rural and high-tension areas.
4. Address migration from a human rights perspective rather than a purely security-driven approach.
5. Dissociate from the narratives of individual EU member states and align with a regional approach to collaboration with the MENA region.

## 3.5 Work Package 5 – Policy Brief on EU Member States' Democracy Support Practices

### 3.5.1 Executive Summary

This policy brief advocates for best practices of **democracy support from selected EUMS** towards the EU's Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods. We recommend creating a **clear EU institutions' strategy** regarding **long-term goals of the Union** on supporting democracy support in its Southern and Eastern neighbourhood. Next, we call for addressing the **relationship between the EU** (its supranational institutions) and **the member states regarding** the division of competencies, roles and responsibilities with democracy support. The EU should be also working on the long-term strategy on democracy support practices and policies in **the partner countries at war, military conflict.** We recommend also defining the involvement of **civil society and non-governmental actors** supporting democracy. Finally, the EU should be addressing the context of the **de-Europeanisation** process within the EU, the contestation of the EU norms by the MS themselves.

### 3.5.2 Context and Scope of Current Practices of Democracy Support

WP5 identified **democracy support practices in eight EUMS** towards the Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods of the EU. The countries under investigation were Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden. Our main goal was to analyse and map involved actors, applied instruments and funding schemes and determine whether internal actors in countries under investigation contested democracy support.

We refer to Wolfgang Merkel's concept of **embedded democracy**. Democracy support practices are understood as support expressed by an actor for an aspect(s) (partial regimes) of democracy, i.e. democratic election, political participation rights, civil rights, horizontal accountability and effective power to govern. Additionally, to identify the democracy support mechanisms, our research also focuses on identifying the instruments and funding schemes used or proposed by the actors to support democratic practices (i.e. financial, economic, political, diplomatic, social, cultural or other instruments).

We also study **democracy support contestation**. By contestation we understand the political conflict that emerges around the international realm focused on support for democracy in the EU's neighbourhood. It is primarily an act of discontent or criticism toward an issue, event or institution. It often challenges dominant intersubjective meanings or established norms, and, as a result, it can restructure the debate on a given issue.

In identifying democracy support practices and their contestation, we were also interested in capturing if and in what capacities both support and contestation touch upon or involve instruments related to the promotion of **gender equality** or **digital transformations**.

**Gender equality** is defined by Council of Europe as entailing equal rights for women and men, girls and boys, as well as the same visibility, empowerment, responsibility and participation in all spheres of public and private life. It also implies equal access to and distribution of resources between women and men. Respective instruments may take more specific shapes when including LGBTIQ+ equality (i.e., legal protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation, sex or gender reassignment).

**Digital transformation** is understood broadly as instruments that involve digital channels of communication essential for transparency, public participation and accountability in all processes of democratisation. This also requires preventing the creation of new mechanisms for authoritarian control and opportunities to spread disinformation, eroding societal trust in state institutions and the EU as well as external actors in democracies and autocracies alike.

Democracy support practices in selected EUMS are **pragmatic**; they predominantly aim to **strengthen stability** in neighbouring countries. Both pre- and post- 2022 Russian aggression against Ukraine, these practices have aimed to contribute to ensuring **security**. Hence, democracy is viewed in selected EUMS as less based on idealistic views but rather as a means to achieve other goals, including the particular interest of a given EUMS like trade, energy or migration control.

Regardless of EU-wide priorities, **the EUMS tend to prioritize their closest vicinity** in democracy support practices. Those closer to the Eastern neighbourhood primarily engage in this region. They see their democracy support policies in those countries as a way of deterring Russian imperialist politics, in particular after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donbas. Meanwhile, those EUMS adjacent to the Southern neighbourhood tend to get engaged in the Union for Mediterranean countries. They strive to manoeuvre between democracy support and dealing with authoritarian regimes in North Africa and the Middle East to keep the region stable.

Considering the historical and political context of EUMS, democracy support often serves as a tool for countries to reinforce their self-image in both international and European politics. This can take different forms: projecting themselves as **normative powers** (Germany, France, Italy, Sweden), adopting a **pragmatic stance** (Denmark), presenting themselves as **models of democratic transition** (Spain, Poland, Germany, Italy), or maintaining **political neutrality** (Austria). EUMS often consider democracy support as a means of strengthening their international political positions as a stable democracy, enhancing their prestige and being self-portrayed as a leading political force in the EU and beyond.

Democracy support is closely intertwined with **development cooperation** and is often not explicitly labelled as related to democracy building. In this regard, the EUMS commitments to EU priorities and activities play an essential role in the context of democracy support; it particularly focuses on strengthening good governance and human rights. Most EUMS anchor their democracy support within **broader EU policies and instruments**.

Two dominant actors have been involved in democracy support in the EUMS under investigation: **national governments** and **civil society organizations**. Governmental actors often reinforce their activity by outsourcing democracy support activities to NGOs. This occurs through funding grant schemes or umbrella organizations. In supporting democracy, CSOs are the key transmitting actors, used by the governments to implement DS. There is, however, less reflection on how such model contributes to sharing democratic practices and engagement in exchanges with local democratic knowledge in partner countries.

The **contestation of democracy support is not salient** in the political discussions of our selected EUMS. None of the contestation practices refers to democracy as a fundamental norm. We identify this as a paradox since, in some EUMS, many illiberal political forces support the government or act as a strong opposition. Illiberal and populist political forces have had minimal impact on contesting democracy support in those EUMS. It did not translate into increased contestation of democracy as a fundamental norm. However, in the long-term this could undermine the credibility of the EU and EUMS in partner countries.

### 3.5.3 Policy Alternatives

The EU should be working on creating a **clear EU institutions' strategy** regarding **long-term goals of the Union** on supporting democracy support in the Southern and Eastern neighbourhood, including convergence with the EU's foreign policy. Many CSOs and non-governmental actors advocate for coherent and long-term strategy setting priorities in changing global and geopolitical surroundings of Europe and its neighbourhoods. This should be based on learning lessons from previous practices, including successes and failures in the partner countries.

Democracy support of selected EUMS is pragmatically related to **regional stability and security** rather than on assumed shared values. These actors aim at increasing stability and security for the EU rather than normative underpinnings. This process has fundamental consequences for democracy support as conflicts around the fundamental norms are visible. Democracy support practices in EUMS tend to focus on either political or developmental aspects of democracy support (including issues of social justice or welfare). In some cases, EUMS tend to prioritise the latter. The EU institutions' strategy should address this discrepancy.

EU institutions' strategy should also define the **relationship between the EU** (its supranational institutions) and **the member states** including the division of democracy support competencies, roles

and responsibilities in the Southern and Eastern neighbourhood. This should take into account the motivation of the MS and the EU institution's democracy support policies and their rational and emotional background.

**EU institutions' strategy** should also shape the involvement of **civil society and non-governmental actors** supporting democracy in the EU's neighbourhoods. While CSOs seem to be dominant actors, they often rely on the EU or national government fundings. They also often manoeuvre to fit the given EUMS national foreign policy agenda.

Following the outbreak of full-scale wars and the start of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, **EU institutions' strategy** should concentrate on the long-term strategy on democracy support practices and policies in **the partner countries at war, military conflict – either active or frozen** and in the context of growing military spending of the European Union.

Lastly, the EU institutions' strategy should address the context of the **de-Europeanisation** process within the EU, the contestation of the EU norms by the MS themselves and the increasing divergence between the member states regarding the foreign policy priorities and operational objectives. This process is interlinked with the ongoing crisis of liberal democracy within the EU and particular member states; it mainly concerns the growing prominence of populist and nativist movements across the continent (often also Eurosceptic) that undermine the established consensus on liberal democracy. The de-democratisation within the EU has not only been visible in these countries' foreign policy discourses but has also significantly weakened the normative influence of the EU in the close neighbourhood.

### 3.5.4 Policy Recommendations

1. Create a **clear EU institutions' strategy** regarding the **long-term goals of the EU** on supporting democracy support in the Southern and Eastern neighbourhood, including convergence with the EU's foreign policy.
2. Address the **relationship between the EU** (its supranational institutions) and **MS** regarding the division of democracy support competencies, roles and responsibilities in the Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods, taking into account the motivation of the MS and the EU institution's DS policies and their rational and emotional background.
3. Work on the long-term strategy on democracy support practices and policies in **the partner countries at war, military conflict – either active or frozen** and in the context of growing military spending of the Union
4. Define the involvement of **civil society and non-governmental actors** supporting democracy in the EU's neighbourhoods.
5. Address the context of the **de-Europeanisation** process within the EU, the contestation of the EU norms by the MS themselves, and the increasing divergence between the MS regarding the foreign policy priorities and operational objectives.

## 3.6 Work Package 6 - Policy Brief on Non-EU External Actors - Rebuilding EU Democracy Support in the Southern Neighbourhood

### 3.6.1 Executive Summary

A fractured global order is forcing the EU to rethink both its neighbourhood and its role within it. The broader international context is characterised by a level of uncertainty higher than ever, determined by the roller-coaster-like policies of the Trump administration and the emergence of alternative poles of power (Lika and Riga, 2024). In the EU's Southern Neighbourhood, these pressures intersect with

already existing regional rivalries and governance fragilities, creating a crowded arena where external actors compete to gain influence, set rules and allocate resources (Alcaro and Dijkstra, 2024). Within this environment, the EU has sought to pivot from a primarily 'normative' to a more 'geopolitical' actor, but its practice has been uneven. While the EU has elaborated a new Middle East Strategy on paper, the contrast between a unified response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a divided stance on the Gaza war and the regional spillovers has fuelled accusations of double standards and weakened the credibility of its role as a democracy supporter.

This 'normative-supported democratic vacuum' leaves more room for non-EU actors that blend selective democracy support, authoritarian enabling and discriminating engagement. Russia advances illiberal narratives and security ties, while China offers development finance and surveillance-ready digital infrastructures. The Gulf monarchies stabilise their allies through financial patronage, and Türkiye exploits the EU's security needs at the expense of democracy. The United States also appears to prioritise security partnerships and multilateral bodies, such as the UN and the Council of Europe, which disseminate norms but face political constraints.

Beyond power politics, the limited success of a decade of EU-led democracy support programs in Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia shows local scepticism when external engagement privileges stability over accountability. To regain influence, the EU should revise its definition of democracy promotion and integrate such goals into its trade, migration, energy and security policies. This implies consistently applying international law, supporting grassroots and minority actors as well as digital rights, and institutionalising cooperation with both states and local partners to generate a functioning democratic learning loop. Credibly done and well-balanced between interests and values, democracy support could represent a strategic asset for the EU to stabilise and favour the growth of its Neighbourhood.

### 3.6.2 Context and Scope of Current Practices of Democracy (Support)

Over the last decade, the EU's Southern neighbourhood backdrop has undergone profound changes. With the hopes for change of the Arab Uprisings gone, democratic backsliding is now entrenched, military power confrontations are shaping (again) the regional order and civil society appears isolated in shrinking public spaces. Moreover, democracy support in the region unfolds within a global structural shift where power is distributed among several centres rather than a single hegemon. As such, Gulf countries visibly act as central power brokers, Türkiye has consolidated zones of influence, Israel operates as a hegemonic military actor, while Iran navigates between ambitions, proxy support and regime survival.

Coupled with other internal and external issues – from the war in Ukraine to internal contestation – the EU's foreign policy has altered in a way that seems to tilt toward a more status quo-oriented and reactive posture than a cooperative, proactive one (Carothers et al., 2025). In other words, all these elements have favoured the growing logic of '*minilateralism*'—small, task-oriented coalitions that pursue short-term solutions more agilely than multilateral formats with broader scopes (Afteram and Hefele, 2025). In practice, states and small, interest-based coalitions now broker energy corridors, migration arrangements and security files through flexible formats that prioritise speed and interests over shared rules and commitments to democracy and human rights. For an EU that has long framed itself as a normative power, the implication is stark: if its narrative credibility and instrument coherence are not secured, partners can 'shop' for alternative offers, timelines and norms (Huber et al., 2025).

Yet, this does not mean the EU should stop cooperating or seeking solutions with external partners in the region; rather, it should critically reassess how it views its practices. Within this context, the binary of 'democracy promoters' versus 'autocracy supporters' obscures how actors actually operate. As the SHAPEDEM-EU research has demonstrated, the determinant is less regime type than practice, meaning that non-EU actors shift tactics across issues, contexts and moments due to their strategic interests, rather than identity labels or political alignment (Bourekba and Abrami, 2025). Therefore, it is crucial to understand that, regardless of their democratic credentials, the actions of non-EU actors can result in authoritarian enabling and/or democracy prevention – even in the absence of direct and intentional authoritarian collaboration.

**Competing narratives and models compound these practices.** Russia offers security justifications, China markets an authoritarian modernisation pathway that emphasises growth, order and socio-economic rights over liberal political guarantees, while Gulf monarchies champion stability-first governance that sidelines political pluralism. These frames gain traction where EU action appears inconsistent, nowhere more visible than the contrast between the EU's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its hesitant stance on Gaza, which many in the region read as double standards. The credibility cost is not rhetorical as it reshapes cooperation possibilities and the willingness of non-EU states and non-state actors to risk alignment with European agendas (Jonasson, 2025).

Across the four policy fields where external influence is most pronounced—energy, migration, security and trade—this contestation unfolds through specific instruments. Energy diversification compacts can either enhance procurement transparency or facilitate corruption. Migration arrangements can establish human mobility systems with due process and oversight or normalise coercive containment that erodes human rights. Security and political assistance can solidify inclusive functioning governance systems or flow into clientelist or partisan networks without accountability safeguards. Trade and investment can scale inclusive value chains and rule-of-law reforms or reproduce privileges that sidestep social inclusivity and human rights. When these files are handled separately and transactionally, democracy support becomes a low priority that can easily be forgone. When they are coordinated, they tend to strengthen each other and attract support for reform, resulting in more sustainable and long-term patterns of cooperation.

In this regard, domestic dynamics in the Southern neighbourhood illustrate both the opportunities and pitfalls. In Tunisia, a decade that began with pluralisation ended with the re-emergence of authoritarianism. Early selective democracy support helped catalyse participation but also raised the stakes of zero-sum politics. Recent European migration bargaining, in the absence of robust civic-space safeguards, signalled that externalising border control could override concerns for democracy. In Palestine, the interplay of occupation, institutional paralysis and divided authority means external actors' security-first or proxy strategies often amount to authoritarian enabling, whether by reinforcing parallel governance in Gaza, entrenching unaccountable PA structures in the West Bank, or diffusing puzzling partnerships with Israel. In Lebanon, consociational rules and fragmented coercive authority have generated 'crisis management without transformation,' where external actors' mediation, financial support and security cooperation create an environment that is relatively stable but characterised by malfunctioning practices that favour their own objectives rather than genuine democratic development.

**Second, if we understand perceptions as 'the currency of soft power', once depleted, rival models fill the vacuum.** SHAPEDEM-EU research highlights that when international engagement is experienced as selective, securitised, or gatekeeper-mediated, it erodes the very constituencies

needed for reform. In Palestine, the rejection of the 2006 election outcome and a securitised Oslo architecture turned democracy promotion into a synonym for managing fragmentation. In Lebanon, the failure to secure an independent inquiry into the 2020 Beirut port explosion became a shorthand for the limits of norm-based diplomacy (Daga, 2025). In Tunisia, muted and inconsistent responses to backsliding confirmed the view that stability and migration take precedence over values (Jallad et al., 2025).

**At the societal level, two other cross-cutting arenas can decisively determine the quality of democracy support**. The first is gender equality (Elmasry, 2025; Saba, 2025). In settings like Palestine, initiatives that yield symbolic gains at best, but do not grapple with structural constraints such as movement restrictions, expropriation and legal inequality (Abualsaid, 2023). In Lebanon, refugees and women are too often framed as passive beneficiaries rather than economic and civic agents, and intersectional barriers (status, informality, poverty) remain under-addressed (Ghosheh, 2019). Tunisia demonstrates that when legal aid, services, livelihoods and civic learning are bundled and politically protected, women's socio-economic and political agency can reinforce one another (Schöppner, 2025). The second arena is digital transformation. Authoritarian diffusion now extends through media manipulation, data localisation and biometric systems. Without a credible European offer—secure communications and legal defence for civic actors, data protection and sustained support for independent media—civic space will continue to shrink (Osypchuk, 2025).

Third, multilateral and regional organisations remain relevant but bounded. The UN provides electoral assistance, capacity building and norm codification, often with EU funding or co-implementation. However, its leverage is constrained by member-state consent and geopolitics, resulting in technical gains without political guarantees (Ventura, 2025). Similarly, the Council of Europe exports legal standards and expertise, but beyond Europe, these tools rely on voluntary uptake and can inadvertently legitimise token compliance if not paired with frank political diagnostics (Schöppner, 2025). In the current 'minilateral age', these institutions function best when the EU aligns its own bilateral levers with multilateral frames—rather than using one to compensate for inconsistencies in the other.

### 3.6.3 Policy Alternatives

The traditional assumption is that the EU's comparative advantage is a rules-based identity backed by market access, regulatory power, financial instruments and security guarantees. As long as it might remain valid, to persuade others in a multipolar and minilateral order, the EU's offer in all crucial areas must be coherent across files, consistent with international law and co-owned not only with states but also with local partners. Again, repositioning EU democracy support as a strategic asset lies on the brink of thin ice: abandoning the sterile democracy–autocracy frame while resisting a slide into transactional bargains that are detrimental to democratic development.

**First, the EU should understand that consistency is not a luxury but the price of normative influence.** The sharp contrast between its responses to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza has undermined its reliability in the Southern neighbourhood. Where international law is applied selectively, regional partners and publics infer that democracy support is instrumental. A principled, even-handed application of norms and human-rights clauses should anchor the EU's bid. This entails a willingness to apply conditionalities, i.e. suspend benefits, adjust programming, or apply targeted restrictions when clauses are breached, and to support accountability processes, irrespective of the actor involved.

**Politics cannot be compartmentalised.** Development and economic cooperation can reshape power relations. However, if they ignore civic space and the rule of law, they can entrench actors who resist

accountability. The remedy is to engineer coherence, where clear *ex-ante* conditions precede negotiations on trade, energy, migration and security, and are codified and monitored through measurable benchmarks. The goal is not maximalist conditionality but credible, transparent trade-offs: energy diversification accompanied by labour safeguards, procurement transparency and anti-corruption; mobility partnerships with due process guarantees protection mechanisms and independent oversight; security assistance coupled with integrity systems, parliamentary control and community accountability; trade facilitation tied to customs reform and competition policy.

**The EU should not conceal inaction or a lack of political will behind the rhetoric of realism and pragmatism.** The Union should use its leverage to set clear, realistic governance outcomes in exchange for cooperation and communicate them upfront. In migration, this means complementing border management with protection pathways, legal aid and monitored returns. In the energy, climate and connectivity sectors, this means that infrastructure projects are paired with open procurement and local content rules that include various economic and social actors in value chains. In politics and security, it means supporting domestic institutions and military cooperation only where balanced governance systems and civilian oversight are in place. This approach converts leverage into predictable incentives, rather than *ad-hoc* side resources that cannot be tracked or that are dispersed. This implies holding traditional partners to standards, too. If the EU is to balance interests with ideals, it must be prepared to hold close allies—such as the Gulf monarchies, Israel and Türkiye—to agreed-upon benchmarks without defaulting to optics management. This implies scrutinising security cooperation for rights compliance, ensuring that economic projects do not underwrite repression or surveillance drift, and, most critically, including pressing – or even blocking agreements and implementing sanctions – for steps consistent with a viable solution in areas of conflict resolution alongside international law accountability and institutional reform.

**Challenge competing narratives by changing practice.** Russian, Chinese and Gulf narratives travel because they are seen as delivering order, rapid development and respect for sovereignty. A more unified EU voice on sensitive issues—paired with concrete, enforceable clauses in deals—will reduce room for accusations of hypocrisy. Strategic communication should follow policy change, not substitute for it. This requires matching responses to real practices, not regime labels (e.g. Tunisia) or promises based on promises of privileged membership (e.g. Türkiye) that can hardly materialise and only risk alienating its partners. Where authoritarian enabling occurs, offering valuable financial alternatives, securing bipartisan political support, and supporting civil society are crucial to elaborate a coherent and sustainable strategy that is inclusive for both state and non-state actors.

**Go beyond the state—systematically.** Field evidence shows democracy support sticks when it is close to communities, delivered through actors that command trust, and tied to tangible benefits (Jallad et al., 2025). Funding systems should include smaller and grassroots organisations—including refugee and women-led groups—rather than defaulting to large intermediaries. This is not a retreat from institutions but an investment in the social foundations that make institutions accountable. This also implies treating gender equality and digital rights as hard governance, too. Programmes that leave structural constraints intact will not deliver. In Palestine, initiatives that do not confront movement restrictions, expropriation and legal inequality cannot sustainably expand women's agency. In Lebanon, there is a shift from needs-based portrayals of refugee women to leadership-based approaches that recognise economic contribution and political voice. As across the region, digital transformation is now another battleground, the EU should offer a European counter-bundle: secure communications and anti-spyware support for CSOs, journalists and lawyers; legal defence for

surveillance victims; sustained support to independent media and fact-checking; and GDPR-compatible data-protection and due-process clauses embedded in all digital, border and security cooperation.

**Organise for delivery through multilateral anchoring.** The reality tells that not all EU Members have equal credibility in the South. A 'Team Europe' (Baoumi, 2025) vanguard—countries often viewed more positively (e.g., Belgium, Ireland, Slovenia, Spain)—can co-lead democracy-and-rights tracks while anchoring standards and pressing other members to comply. This means utilising minilateral groups solely to implement agreed-upon standards with time-bound mandates and accountable plans, aligning with frameworks such as the New Pact for the Mediterranean so that economy, migration and security are tied to governance, transparency and democracy.

**Address anti-European sentiment by fixing policy, not narratives.** Frustrations over the EU's double standards, restrictive migration policies and support for authoritarian incumbents will not be resolved by counter-disinformation alone. The EU should also support groups that, while not always aligned with its messaging, share fundamental democratic values and represent 'democratic antibodies' against the germination of authoritarianism. By incorporating enforceable clauses and transparent trade-offs, the EU can demonstrate that partnerships are equal and that reforms are genuine (Huber et al., 2025). This requires not just better tools but also a different method: iterative learning with local actors, contestation as a design feature, and incentives that reward inclusive coalitions, not only compliant counterparts (Pace and Achrainer, 2025). In consociational or occupied milieus like Lebanon and Palestine, the EU should rely on context-specific metrics (coalition-building, local accountability, legal-aid outcomes), not only on formal state benchmarks but also on 'lower politics' actors.

Finally, **external advocacy depends on internal renewal.** Rule-of-law backsliding within the EU, tolerance of external influences, or uneven refugee protections undermine the EU's external credibility. The more coherent the internal model, the harder it is for rivals to weaponize 'hypocrisy' narratives (Balfour, 2024). If the EU matches its geopolitical turn with principled instruments, equal partnerships and locally grounded coalitions across energy, migration, security and trade, democracy support will enhance—rather than compete with—European stability.

### 3.6.4 Policy Recommendations

In short, the context is not hostile to democracy support so much as unforgiving of inconsistency. Where the EU aligns its interests with international law and invests in locally legitimate actors, its influence grows. Where it defaults to transactionalism and partisanship, others' models look more credible. The Southern Neighbourhood's minilateral, multipolar reality does not eliminate the EU's leverage. It simply demands that leverage be exercised coherently, transparently, and in ways that the public can recognise as fair and beneficial. To do so, the EU should:

- **Forge equal, rules-based partnerships through carrots *and* sticks, avoiding double standards**. The EU and its Members should replace ad-hoc deals with country cooperation compacts that set clear reform benchmarks tied to predictable incentives (market access, investment, mobility) and credible consequences (pauses, retargeting) for breaches. Apply these rules uniformly across partners and files—including consistent use of sanctions and conditionality in all theatres (e.g., Russia and Israel)—to restore credibility.
- **Embed democracy safeguards in core cooperation files.** Treat energy/climate, security, trade/investment and migration/mobility as democracy relevant. Package strategic deliverables with baseline commitments to the rule of law, civic space, due process and accountability (e.g., human-rights compliance in security support; transparency/anti-corruption in energy and trade;

protection standards and oversight in mobility). This makes interests and ideals reinforce each other instead of competing.

- **Go beyond the state**: anchor bottom-up legitimacy with gender and digital at the core. Make civil society, municipalities, independent media, social partners and SMEs standing counterparts—not just implementers. Treat gender equality (participation, protection, leadership) and digital rights (data protection, anti-surveillance, secure communications, media pluralism) as cross-cutting performance metrics in all EU cooperation. This builds durable constituencies for reform and resilience to authoritarian diffusion.
- **Multilateral first**: one EU voice in minilateral settings. Use UN/CoE/OSCE and regional formats to establish common baselines. Where minilateral or corridor initiatives are necessary, hard-wire those same standards and joint oversight. Organise delivery through Team Europe to avoid member-state freelancing that undercuts leverage.
- **Match the external offer with internal renewal.** Safeguard democracy and human rights inside the EU: enforce rule-of-law conditionality, protect NGOs and civic space, strengthen media independence and disinformation resilience, ensure inclusive political participation, and adopt rights-based digital regulation. Publicly align the EU's internal and external actions—including on sanctions and accountability in Gaza/Ukraine—so partners see one coherent standard rather than rhetoric.

# 4 Conclusions

The SHAPEDEM-EU policy briefs set out to provide a concise overview of current flaws in EU democracy support practices and develop actional policy recommendations for EU policymakers to amend those. The findings underscore areas of convergence as well as points of divergence between the two neighbourhoods. Local actors from both neighbourhoods have emphasised the need for funding mechanisms that are less bureaucratic and more accessible to a broader set of actors on the ground. Yet, civil society stakeholders in Southern neighbourhood have noted the EU's current credibility crisis vis-à-vis actors in the region, who are now less willing to be associated with the EU and its member states. In contrast, within the Eastern neighbourhood there persists a strong consensus that relations with the EU, while imperfect, are nonetheless beneficial and necessary for the continuation of democratic reforms.

Looking inwards and assessing the role of member states, their democracy support strategies are often guided by geographical proximity and strategic consideration. Countries in the East aim at strengthening democracy in their neighbouring countries with a focus on countering Russia's interference, while Southern member states balance democracy support with stability priorities such as migration. Yet, there is still little clarity on the division of roles and capacities between the EU institutions and its member states – underscoring the need for a coherent and long-term strategy among all actors involved.

Looking outwards at the role of non-EU external actors in supporting or opposing democracy support in the EU's neighbourhood, findings show that the binary of 'democracy promoters' versus 'autocracy supporters' does not adequately reflect how actors operate. Rather than focusing on the regime type, the EU should look at practice; non-EU actors act based on issues, context and moments due to their strategic interest, rather than identity label or political alignment. The EU's credibility crisis in the Southern neighbourhood has left a vacuum for alternatives and, at times, malign actors to gain ground. To counter this, the EU should align action with rhetoric, offer valuable financial alternatives, secure bipartisan political support, and strengthen civil society engagement.

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