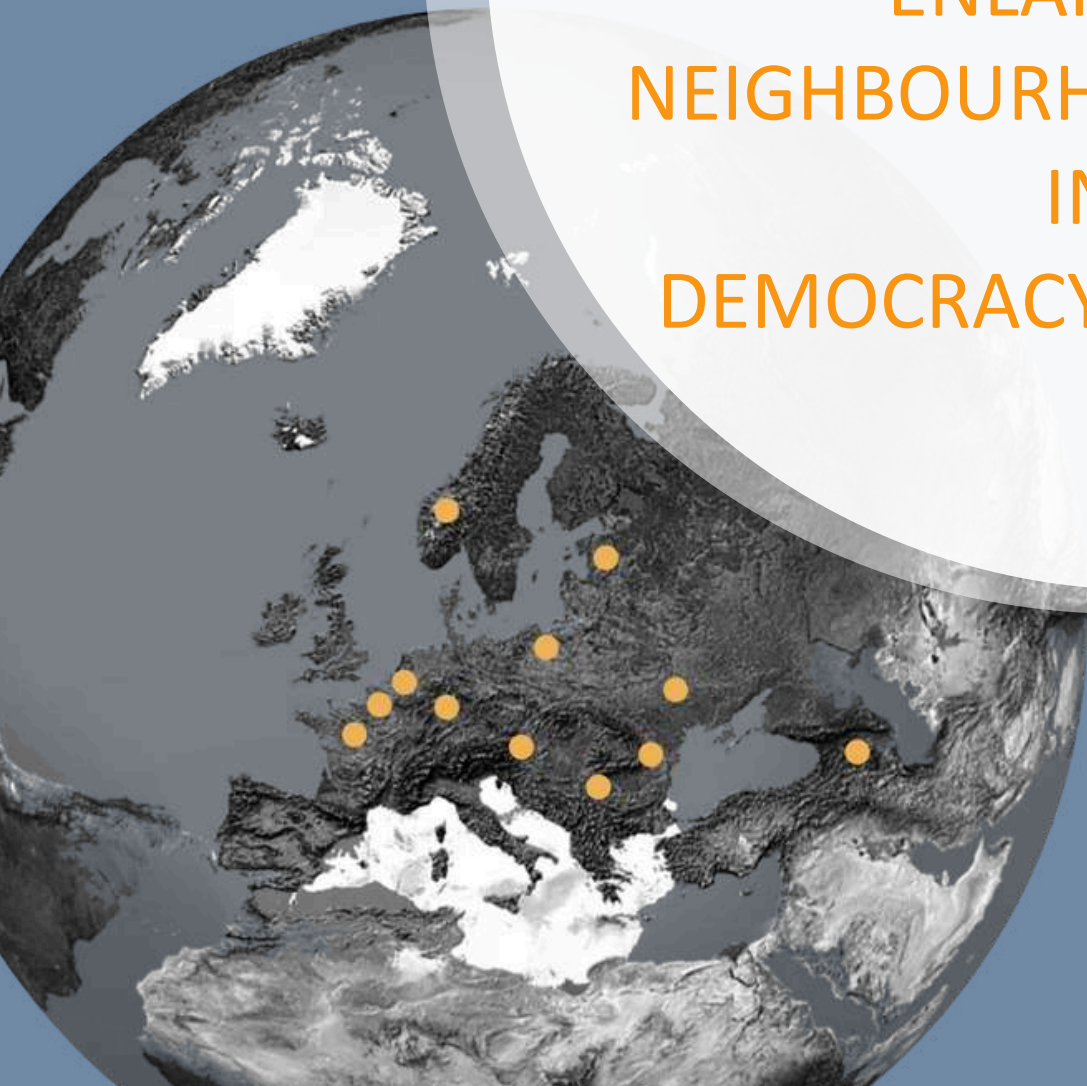# THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTIONS OF THE EU'S ENLARGEMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICIES IN THE AREA OF DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

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REUNIR – D2.3 – WORKING PAPER ON THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTIONS OF THE EU'S ENLARGEMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICIES IN THE AREA OF DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

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CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of the European integration project asserted the importance of liberal democracy as one of the pillars of the European Union (EU). It has also been a key building block of foreign policy, through the enlargement process and European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The EU's democracy promotion agenda has been largely successful in central and eastern Europe however, it has been put to the test in both the Western Balkans (WB) and the Eastern neighbourhood (EN), where the EU has struggled to promote sustainable democratisation. EU democracy promotion policies have been implemented in a rapidly changing international, regional and domestic environment, characterised by democratic breakthroughs and setbacks, as well as the influence of non-western actors. Democratic advances, such as those achieved as part of protest movements and colour revolutions, have sometimes been followed by reversals. Likewise, democratic backsliding trends have in some cases been turned around, raising hopes for the fate of liberal democracy in the WB and EN regions.

Over the past decade the EU itself has been drastically changing, whether in terms of institutional machinery, policy toolbox or political dynamics. With the adoption of Council conclusions on democracy support in the EU's external relations (2009), the EU's strategic framework on human rights and democracy (2012) and the related action plans on human rights and democracy (2012-14; 2015-19; 2020-24), it has developed a toolbox for external democracy support. This new framework has been implemented alongside institutional changes brought about by the Treaty of Lisbon to increase the coherence and effectiveness of EU external action. However, despite its centrality to EU external action (as proclaimed in Article 21 TEU), supporting democracy abroad has proved increasingly challenging in light of the complex institutional EU set-up, the scattered policy instruments, the variety of approaches to democracy assistance among EU actors (including Member States) (European Partnership for Democracy (EPD), 2019), as well as unstable regional contexts (conflicts) and diverse foreign policy interests. EU democracy support policies have been criticised for failing to adjust to realities on the ground, and for lacking credibility through prioritising stability and security considerations over democracy support (Börzel & Lebanidze, 2017; Dandashly, 2015, 2018).

Despite the diversity of political trajectories in the WB and EN, many of the tensions observed over the past decades have fed into poor representation of citizens' interests, electoral fraud, frequent abuses of laws by officials, and mistrust vis-à-vis public institutions. Political instability, authoritarian entrenchment and the weak embeddedness of democracy across the EU's neighbouring regions are also closely connected to economic, social and cultural dynamics. Both the WB and EN suffer from high levels of corruption, which has led to socio-economic tensions. In turn, socio-economic tensions can reinforce local demand for democratisation or feed political crises, instability, authoritarian entrenchment, as well as outbursts of violence and nationalism. External actors' policies are thus filtered by domestic actors' perceptions, narratives and strategies, and thereby yield a variety of effects that have yet to be fully grasped. Understanding how local actors interpret and use external influences is crucial to better understand the effects of external engagement (or lack thereof) on political regime trajectories.

Furthermore, the EU's democracy support in both regions operates in a domestic context targeted by other external actors whose political models and geopolitical interests sharply differ from the EU's own normative

script and objectives, such as Russia, China, and others (for example Turkey and the United Arab Emirates)
(Bossuyt & Kaczmarski, 2021; Hackenesch, 2015; Risse & Babayan, 2015; Casier, 2021; Delcour, 2017;
Noutcheva, 2017, Kaczmarski, 2017; Samokhvalov, 2017; Yakouchyk, 2016). Russia remains the main spoiler
of EU democracy promotion, both at home and in the neighbouring regions and has been depicted as a
'negative actor' and a 'black knight', weakening democratic perspectives in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood
(Tolstrup, 2009, 2014, 2015). However, Russia has also been found to *de-facto* work towards (even if
unintendedly) the objectives of western democracy promoters in countries like Georgia and Ukraine (Delcour
& Wolczuk, 2015). China, for its part, has cautiously expanded its efforts at influencing the European
information space through trying to promote its own narratives and interests, *inter alia* undermining
democratic processes and supressing critical voices (Eastern Europe Studies Centre, 2024).

In addition to the internal-external dynamics, both WB and EN countries have suffered from conflicts that
have affected their democratic transition and consolidation. The EU has had to adapt to this volatile and
complex environment, which has been characterised by uncertainties and risks. Complexities in the
international environment involve 'unknown and/or uncertain attributes' of opponents that push policy
makers to operate in a foggy situation involving 'high-risk calculation' (Jarvis, 2011, p. 297). The terms 'risk'
and 'uncertainty' can mean different things to different people. For Knight, risk can mean 'a quantity
susceptible of measurement' (Knight, 1921, pp. 19–20). Uncertainty, in contrast, has an unmeasurable quality
to it (Knight, 1921, p. 20). Uncertainty can therefore be limited to non-quantifiable cases in comparison to
risk, which can be more quantifiable (Knight, 1921, p. 20). Katzenstein and Seybert (2018) use the
terminology of calculable versus incalculable to capture the distinction between the domain of risk
characterised by calculable expectations about the future, and the domain of uncertainty defined by its
unforeseeable qualities (Katzenstein and Seybert, 2018, p. 85).

The differentiation between risk and uncertainty has significant implications for policymakers, as it influences
their ability to handle foreseeable shocks versus unpredictable events. Under conditions of risks, policy
makers and relevant stakeholders operate in the domain of the expected and predictable. They are aware of
the consequences of certain occurrences and can attach probabilities to different eventualities. In such
scenarios, they find themselves in an environment where they have adequate information that can help them
estimate the risks and plan accordingly the resources at their disposal. In complex but predictable
environments, policy makers act with the intention of exerting control over future outcomes, i.e. they
exercise what Katzenstein and Seybert (2018) refer to as control power.

Under conditions of uncertainty, policy makers must be creative and utilise the tools that they have at their
disposal in innovative ways to handle unpredictable scenarios. The concept of protean power has emerged
as a framework to understand how individuals, organisations, and states navigate such dynamic and
uncertain environments. Protean power, as conceptualised by Katzenstein and Seybert (2018) refers to
'practices of agile actors coping with uncertainty' (Katzenstein & Seybert, 2018, p. 80). Protean power stems
from the ability of actors to shape their environments by leveraging a combination of resources, strategies,
and networks, and by innovating and improvising in situations of unexpected developments. This is reflected
in flexibility, adaptability, resilience and transformation in the face of sudden shocks to the status quo. Power

in such contexts is generated through the surprising actions and self-transformation of agile actors who try to steer the course of uncertainty.

Our analysis of control and protean power starts with acknowledging the distinction between risk and uncertainty in decision-making as suggested by Katzenstein and Seybert (2018). The former is connected to the realm of predictable and foreseeable occurrences whereas the latter is experienced because of the potentiality of unpredictable and unexpected change. Classifying events and situations as representing risks versus uncertainties is not easy. In retrospect, we can make relatively safe assumptions about political life as risky or uncertain, but we cannot be sure that policy makers at the time have experienced the environment as risky or uncertain in the same way as we describe it years later. We therefore try to contextualise the events and occurrences in the Western Balkans and the eastern neighbourhood that have spurred the EU into action over the course of the last 30 years, keeping in mind 'the fluidity of real-life situations that often oscillate between risk and uncertainty' (Katzenstein and Seybert, 2018, p.85) and providing an expert reading of predominant perceptions of risks and uncertainties at the time of the events.

Likewise, when we distinguish between the effects of control power, linked to the domain of risk, and the effects of protean power, generated in the context of radical uncertainty (Katzenstein and Seybert, 2018), we are cognisant of the interplay between the two types of power and their interdependent and even reinforcing qualities. Protean power often leans on control power capabilities, while control power resources are often necessary for generating protean effects. Our analysis is in this sense both guided by the main conceptual framework offered by Katzenstein and Seybert and sensitive to the complexity of the empirical contexts that we deal with.

In the context of EU democracy promotion, we will analyse the EU policies in the WB6 and the three new candidate countries from the EN (EN3) through two stages: democratisation and autocratisation. After the fall of communist regimes, countries in both regions have gone through a process of democratisation, as well as a more recent regress into autocratisation. The EU and other external actors such as the US, China, Russia and Turkey have engaged with these countries and these processes in various forms along the way. Over the past three decades, the EU has been a prime democracy promotor in the WB and EN – a commitment reflective of its broader foreign policy objectives laid down in the Treaties. However, this pursuit has not been devoid of external risks and radical uncertainties, both expected and unexpected, which have shaped the domestic and international landscape for democracy promotion in these regions since the early 1990s.

On the one hand, calculated external risks include geopolitical shifts, such as political interference in the WB6 and EN3 countries by other international or regional actors like Russia, China, Turkey; escalation of lingering regional conflicts; and economic shocks that pose conceivable challenges to the domestic democracy agenda. On the other hand, radical uncertainties encompass unforeseen events, geopolitical surprises (such as (some) wars and conflicts), and unexpected social and political upheavals (such as the colour revolutions), which have added an element of unpredictability to the EU's endeavours and brought more external threats to EU strategies in the region. In its response to all these risks and uncertainties, in terms of democracy promotion, the EU, as this paper shows, has focused mostly on its traditional tools and polices, i.e. more control (traditional) power.

This paper first investigates the risks and uncertainties that have affected the EU's democracy promotion in the WB6 and EN3 over the last 30 - 35 years. It then examines the control power tools the EU has used and the innovations and improvisations it has employed in response to the dynamic and complex nature of the political landscape in these regions.

2. DEMOCRATIC RISKS AND UNCERTAINTIES IN THE WB AND EN

The uncertainty of the 1990s with respect to European security created an unparalleled opportunity for democratisation in the WB and EN. The collapse of communism, while creating immediate political instability, was seen as an enormous chance to expand the liberal democratic community in Europe and beyond. In subsequent years, the democratic fate of countries from these regions has been tested both from within and from outside. Key democratic risks were internal and rooted in difficult conditions for democratic consolidation. For example, political elites were unwilling to cede power to independent institutions governed by the rule of law, and societies, which occasionally revolted against rampant political corruption, were unable to dislodge interests vested in the status quo. Democratic risks also emerged from instability brought by periodically destabilising conflicts and wars, as well as by the activities of other political players vying for influence in the two regions.

2.1. Towards democratisation: 1990s until early 2000

The democracy agenda in the WB6 and EN3 countries gained momentum with the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, and the re-appearance on the map of new independent European states. The dissolution of Yugoslavia was understood by the EC to be an opportunity to increase its own foreign policy clout. Jacques Poos, Luxembourgish presidency-holder of the Council, famously declared in June 1991 that 'This *is* the *hour* of *Europe*, not the *hour* of the Americans' (italics added). The sentence clearly identified that the alternative to European engagement was the US. While the Serbian leadership tried to mobilise Soviet support, especially in March 1991, the Soviet military leadership was unable to assist, and soon fell out of power following the failed August 1991 coup.

Still, it was not the hour of Europe. While Europe was the main actor in 1991, it failed to prevent the spread and escalation of the war, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992. The dominant actor became the UN, while the US gradually gained in prominence, taking the lead in seeking to end the war in Bosnia in 1995. For the rest of the decade, the US became the dominant external actor in the Balkans, focusing on military intervention and diplomacy. The Contact group, which included the US, Russia, Britain, France and Germany became the main vehicle of engagement, sidelining the EU as an institution. While Russia was involved, it was of less importance during the 1990s.

A major turning-point was NATO intervention in 1999, which marked the peak of western - and especially US engagement. This intervention was opposed by key powers (Russia and China) and lacked UN SC authorisation. The intervention was an important engine for rising anti-western policy development in Russia and China. There were also volunteers in the wars, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina from different backgrounds (radical Islamists on the Bosnian government side (Bougarel, 2007), Russians on the Bosnian Serb side), but their overall impact on the war was minor.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia meant the end of the federation of republics and the consolidation and formation of new independent states. These new states were quick to pass constitutions and laws, which

among other things determined who was a citizen (the subsequently created state of Kosovo still contends for statehood recognition). In the 1990s, most of the post-Yugoslav space was characterised by authoritarian and ethnonationalist regimes. Albania also struggled with authoritarianism and state collapse throughout the decade. Thus, multi-party elections and formal democratic institutions did not translate into democratisation.

In the WB, the post-conflict decade was shaped by increasing EU engagement. The conditional offer of EU membership to the region was seen as a key transformative tool and embedded in the larger enlargement and construction of a more integrated EU. Other actors were less interested in the Western Balkans. For Russia, the first decade of Putin's rule was shaped by good relations with the EU that only began to break down following the Russian military intervention in Georgia. Turkey, under the early years of Erdoğan, sought closer ties to the EU. Its economic and cultural engagement therefore did not conflict with the region's Euro-Atlantic agenda.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the former socialist republics that regained independence also started a wide-ranging process of economic and political transformation. All countries underwent periods of political instability throughout the 1990s. The (in)stability of the governments also negatively affected the economic situation (Gurgul and Lach, 2013). Importantly, political and economic transformations remained selective and incomplete (see Börzel, 2011). In all post-Soviet countries, they were affected by the persistence of informal practices and networks that operate 'on the boundaries between political, economic and civil sectors' (Aliyev, 2015), and in fact form a continuum with formal institutions (Gel'man, 2022).

In many WB and EN countries, civil society and opposition parties remained largely marginalised due to the ever-centralising power practices of their governments. Bieber (2020) has classified this as a return to authoritarianism in some cases, and as new competitive authoritarianism in others. In brief, when democratic institutions are maintained in form only and the situation for the opposition becomes harder due to restrictions, thus rendering competition with the ruling elites unrealistic, people start taking to the streets. These 'positive' shocks that the EU could not foresee in eastern Europe and the south Caucasus were the 'colour revolutions' – the non-violent protests that led to a change in government in Georgia, Ukraine, and ultimately also Armenia[1].

These pro-democracy protests were successful in establishing new, more democratic regimes, and therefore created new opportunities for the EU to work with democratic leaders. In Georgia, the flawed parliamentary elections of November 2003 caused widespread yet peaceful protests (the 'Rose Revolution') and led to the resignation of President Shevardnadze. Mikheil Saakashvili gained power after presidential elections were held in January 2004, and subsequent parliamentary elections gave the ruling coalition an overwhelming mandate. In Ukraine, a year later, the rigged first-round of the 2004 presidential elections sparked massive protests and ultimately resulted in the victory of the opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko over the candidate representing continuity with the previous regime, Viktor Yanukovych. The 'pace and scope of changes'

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[1] In Belarus, the 2006 'Denim Revolution' was unsuccessful. We do not discuss Moldova's 'Twitter revolution' here, as both the international context and outcomes of the mobilisation were different (Mungiu-Pippidi & Munteanu, 2009).

triggered by the Orange revolution surprised 'the EU, the US, Russia and, not least, most Ukrainians themselves' (Wolczuk, 2005).

Even if selective and incomplete, the political and economic transformations that unfolded in the 1990s also had an effect on the post-Soviet countries' international links and led to a re-alignment of their international partnerships (Lane, 2007). However, until the 2004 enlargement, the region did not rank high on the EU's political agenda (except for Russia and Ukraine). This is also why – in contrast to the wars in the former Yugoslavia – the conflicts that erupted in the South Caucasus (Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia) and Transnistria in the late 1980s and early 1990s) did not attract the EU's attention. The EU substantially stepped up its involvement in the following decade – primarily through the ENP – with the aim to create a ring of well-governed countries on its periphery.

2.2. The rise of authoritarianism in the WB and EN countries

2.2.1. Democratic Risks in the WB

In the Western Balkans, the end of competitive authoritarian regimes in Croatia and Serbia in 2000 appeared to mark a process of democratic renewal. However, as Dolenec (2013) has shown, the legacies of the Yugoslav past, and the new elites that formed with the fall of the old regime, created an environment that has made the adoption of institutional democratic cultures challenging. New political elites have been successful in building a democratic façade, but this of course is not enough to make democracy effective. In reality, they continued obstructing citizens' political and individual rights by relying on informal structures, clientelism and control of the media (Keil 2018); the regular manufacturing of crises to undermine democracy (Kmezić & Bieber, 2017); and through widespread state capture (Richter & Wunsch, 2020).

The transformation of the 1990s and early 2000s not only opened the political sphere to new players, but the economic sphere as well. The emergence of new political and economic elites and created more discontent among citizens. As a result, democratic consolidation did not take place evenly across the region. Croatia did not experience any substantial episodes of renewed authoritarianism, despite deeply entrenched corruption. Others experienced either incomplete right-up and ethno-nationalist

democratisation, as in Montenegro where the ruling party liberalised but did not democratise, or where democratisation remained episodic and semi-authoritarian regimes returned. In Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia, these became cyclical processes, building on a highly polarised political system with competitive authoritarian regimes replaced by democratising episodes and reversals. Bosnia has been characterised by entrenched ethno-nationalist elites drawing on authoritarian practices to control their electorate.

Serbia, on the other hand, has moved from a period of democratisation between 2000 and 2012 towards an increasingly consolidated competitive authoritarian system under the regime of President Aleksandar Vučić. Over the past decade, Vučić has built up a political system in which his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has cemented its rule through unfairly reducing the opposition's electoral prospects. Activities include manipulating the timing of snap elections, exerting pressure on independent state institutions, bussing in voters from neighbouring countries, and mobilising public resources to support its campaigns. Moreover, the SNS has expanded its influence over the media through both state-owned enterprises and an array of private outlets and has harnessed this influence to discredit its political rivals. Thus, while different patterns prevail, overall competitive authoritarian regimes have remained strong and re-emerged. These regimes have not been affected by EU enlargement, and partially rely on support from key EU Member States.

2.2.2. Social movements and protests in the WB

Colour revolutions and social protest movements re-emerged in the Western Balkans in the 2010s after some of the region's political regimes increasingly moved towards authoritarianism. The protest movements of the 2010s were markedly different from those of the 1990s, which were violent contentious acts and rebellions. Civil unrest in Albania caused by pyramid schemes (Nicholson, 1999), protests by ethnic Albanians in Gostivar and Tetovo in North Macedonia (Iseni, 2013), and protests in Serbia and Kosovo (Hetemi, 2020) against the

Milošević regime (Bulldozer Revolution) constituted challenges and the death of old regimes. The latter two in particular were crucial for the establishment of democratic practices, and still influence movements today. Notably, the Bulldozer Revolution was also influential as a model for the colour revolutions in eastern Europe (Mitchell, 2022) (see later).

In North Macedonia, social movements such as #Protestiram and the colourful revolution (Fiket et al., 2020; Draško *et al.,* 2020) (successfully) challenged the VMRO – DPMNE-led government and its undemocratic practices, which included the co-optation of the judicial and legislative branches of government as well as the public space (media and communal spaces) in 2015/6. While social movements were instrumental in precipitating governmental change, they were not the only factor. Opposition parties were notably proactive in seeking new coalitions and supporting movements, while the EU was also unexpectedly involved in negotiating a political deal (see Przhino Agreement below) to overcome the political crisis of 2015. The latter emanated from revelations of a wiretapping scandal engineered by the then Prime Minister and the head of the National Security Agency. The movements helped usher in a new political vocabulary that centred on citizens in the context of an ethnically divided society.

In Serbia, social movements such as Ne Davimo Beograd (We won't let Belgrade D(r)own), which started as an initiative to preserve public space in 2015 and grew into a movement to oppose the urban policies of the SNS government, managed to mobilise the largest protest since the anti-Milošević protests in 2000 (Pavlović & Milošević, 2002) or the so-called Bulldozer Revolution (Barlovac, 2010; Gordy, 2000). This record was again broken with the anti-violence protests of 2023 (Roussi, 2023). During the latest protests, which started in December 2023 and continued into the new year, protesters took to the streets to ask for the 17 December 2023 election results to be overturned due to reports of voter fraud (Hajdari 2023), and what the OSCE called 'unjust conditions' (2023). Unlike in the case of North Macedonia, the Serbian opposition has failed to unite against the Vučić regime, while the EU's role has followed a predictable path of non-involvement.

Role of Other Actors

The rise of non-European actors in the Western Balkans, which emerged in the 2010s, is the result of both larger global trends and regional developments. Globally, the economic crisis and multiple internal crises led to a more inward-looking EU, as well as the rise of non-European powers, especially China. The antagonistic relationship between the EU on the one hand and China and Russia on the other also furthered engagement in the region, exacerbating these global tensions. Though the rising role of non-Western actors is multifaceted and not inherently conflictual or against the project of Euro-Atlantic integration, it has the potential to hinder reforms (Zweers *et al.,* 2022; Zweers *et al.* 2023). Some actors are more in favour of economic engagement, such as financial investments from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Others might be more disruptive, even if they are less about political influence, such as China. Actors like Russia, on the other hand, have been openly disruptive, most notably in the case of Serbia where both China and Russia have been openly courted by the government and invited to have a strong political and economic presence. In Bosnia Herzegovina and Montenegro, and less so in North Macedonia, Russia and China have also been present, often to the detriment of political stability. Russian and Chinese influence has been less present in Albania and Kosovo, although both Russia and China have affected the latter's international status and

standing (Zweers *et al.,* 2022; Zweers *et al.* 2023). However, Chinese and Russian influence, either in the economic or the political sphere, has not superseded that of the EU as a key player in the region.

Turkey has also been an important influence in the region, particularly during Erdogan's stay in power. During his tenure both as Prime Minister and President, there has been a large expansion of institutional contacts with and private business in the WB. Turkish interest in the region has gone through three stages as highlighted by Koppa, namely the pro-EU period pre-2009, the Davotoglu (former Foreign Minister) period between 2009 and 2016, which saw increasing political engagement with the region through his doctrine of strategic depth (Özkan, 2014; Alpan and Özturk, 2022), and the post-2016 period, which Özturk calls the 'Sultan Erdogan' period of 'pragmatism and authoritarianism' (Koppa 2021, 253). The Turkish government has backed the establishment and expansion of the TIKA aid agency as well the Yunus Emre Institutes for the promotion of Turkish language and culture across the region (Koppa, 2021). The latter period highlighted here has had impactful repercussions for the Western Balkans. Erdogan has made alliances with autocrats in the region, arguably more so than with democratic leaders, as shown by the demands for extradition of Turkish nationals suspected of having Gülenist ties after the failed coup d'etat in 2016 (Bytyci, 2018; Sito-Sucic, 2018; Marusic, 2021). However, this influence has somewhat waned over the last few years, particularly as the economic crisis (Shatakishvili, 2024) in Turkey has deepened.

Lastly, the US has remained an often time disinterested but relevant actor. It continues to wield foreign policy influence in the region and uses its global weight to engage in forceful diplomacy, even if the US economic and military presence is limited. In some cases, such as Kosovo, the US has had a more direct influence vis-à-vis the country's foreign policy and its relations with Serbia, mainly through being part of the Quint[2] (Bergmann, 2018). It has also been involved in pushing for judicial reform in the case of Albania. In North Macedonia it was closely involved in the mediation of the Przhino Agreement. Indeed, the negotiations at one point moved to the residence of the US Ambassador in Skopje (Nova, 2016).

2.2.3. Democratic Risks in the EN

In the EN, the colour revolutions seemed to usher in a new era of democratisation in Georgia and Ukraine. However, the path towards democracy has been anything but linear, both in these two countries and elsewhere in the region. Overall, EN countries remain characterised by 'hybrid stability', even though they vary in terms of access to political and economic resources (Ademmer, Langbein & Börzel, 2018). Authoritarian regimes such as Aliyev's (in Azerbaijan) and Lukashenka's (in Belarus) have not only survived; they have also experienced a new shift towards autocracy in recent years. This shift took place in the wake of rigged elections (such as the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus) or conflict (the 2020 war against Armenia and the takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 in the case of Azerbaijan). In both countries, power is concentrated in the hands of authoritarian leaders, civil liberties are severely restricted and political opposition as well as civil society have been drastically weakened by years of persecution.

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[2] The Quint states are US + France, Italy, Germany and the UK.

Even countries that went through democratic changes in the early 2000s subsequently experienced de-democratisation processes, as was the case in Ukraine under Yanukovych. In other countries such as Moldova, a pro-democratic façade concealing pervasive elite corruption crumbled in the wake of a massive bank scandal in the mid-2010s. However, nowhere has the shift away from democracy been more unexpected and sharper than in Georgia. Since 2020, the country has seriously backslid with respect to basic democratic

principles and key political commitments made vis-à-vis the EU as part of the association agreement (EPRS, 2022). In a context of sharp political polarisation, democratic institutions have gradually been hollowed out and the ruling coalition has increasingly concentrated power in its hands, while also restricting space for dissent. The rule of law has significantly deteriorated, as evidenced by the detention of high-profile opposition leaders. Anti-corruption reforms have slowed down in recent years, and the effective investigation and prosecution of high-level corruption remains a major challenge. The country shifted further away from democracy following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Not only did the country experience democratic backsliding; it also experienced de-Europeanisation. The 'Georgian government's discursive opposition to the EU noticeably intensifie[d] in March 2022, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine' (Tsuladze et al. 2023, p. 314). In 2023, authorities sought to introduce a law prohibiting foreign financing of non-governmental organisations, inspired by Russia's foreign agent law (Kakachia & Lebanidze, 2023). While the government withdrew the project in the wake of massive protests, in 2024, it introduced a new version that was eventually adopted despite societal mobilisation (Gavin, 2024).

In a regional context marked by de-democratisation and autocratic consolidation the 2018 'Velvet Revolution' in Armenia took many by surprise, even though the country had experienced frequent protests against the ruling elite during the preceding decade, especially in the wake of the 2008 presidential elections (Zolyan, 2021). The then authorities' record of excessive use of force suggested that the 2018 protests would end up with a brutal crackdown, thereby perpetuating the rule of the incumbent elite through a constitutional change (Delcour & Hoffmann, 2018). Yet contrary to all expectations, the founder of the Civil Contract party and leader of the demonstrations, Nikol Pashinyan, was elected Prime Minister in early May 2018. Therefore, even though all colour revolutions in the EN led to a change in favour of democracy, they were still a surprise for the EU.

What both the colour revolutions and the social protests had in common, other than standing in opposition to semi-authoritarian governments, was their appeal to the EU to pay attention to what was happening inside their countries. This also underlines the opposition of civil society actors to the EU's approach of backing their governments for the sake of maintaining stability. To some extent, Armenia stands out as an exception: considering the country's sheer security vulnerability, the new authorities in 2018 made it clear that the Velvet Revolution would not lead to any substantial foreign policy shift. However, they increasingly engaged with the EU – a trend that was exacerbated by the 2020-2023 conflicts. This resulted in a clear rapprochement with the EU and detachment from Russia (as evidenced by Armenia's withdrawal from the Russia-driven Collective Security Treaty Organisation).

Conflicts in the EN and their effect on democratisation

The regional conflicts have also been problematic for democratic consolidation. In the last decade, they further obstructed EU democracy promotion by destabilising the neighbourhood countries. The most

significant obstacles to the democratisation agenda were created by the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, the Russo-Ukrainian war that started in 2014 and turned into a full-scale invasion in 2022, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that turned again into a war in 2020. These wars are, in part, embedded in the longer timeframe of territorial conflicts that occurred as part of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, their eruption was unexpected by the EU.

Back in 2008, it was not foreseeable that Russia (backing the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) would wage its first war against a sovereign country since the demise of the Soviet Union, a 'war that took the world by surprise' (Cornell and Starr 2009, p.3). This is despite the rising tensions between Russia and the west that preceded the war, within a context marked by Russia's fierce opposition to the US anti-missile shield project in central Europe, Kosovo's independence and, crucially, Ukrainian and Georgian NATO membership aspirations recognised at the Bucharest Summit in spring 2008. Likewise, the EU did not expect Russia's annexation of Crimea – an 'extreme event' (Sasse, 2017) - and the warfare in Donbas in 2014. In fact, Russia's moves followed what was interpreted in the EU as the resolution of the political crisis that erupted in November 2013. President Yanukovych's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU triggered massive protests, which were brutally repressed. His ousting was interpreted in the EU as the resolution of the crisis, which is why Russia's actions came as a surprise for Brussels.

Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine further destabilised the region and posed a security threat for the EU (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Orenstein, 2023), reverberating well beyond Ukraine. In particular, the invasion has had destabilising effects on two associated countries in the EP, Georgia and Moldova. Both countries find themselves in complex situations as they are domestically fragile and closely linked to Russia. In Georgia, the war has exposed the rift between staunch societal support for Ukraine and the government's refusal to follow western sanctions on Russia.

In addition to addressing the humanitarian consequences of the war in neighbouring Ukraine, Moldova faces the challenge of increased domestic polarisation. Domestic public opinion has long been divided over the country's foreign policy orientation. Crucially, the country is exposed to the threat of a revived conflict in Transnistria, whose fate is closely connected to military developments in nearby southern Ukraine. This threat may be instrumentalised by Russia to destabilise Moldova. The *de facto* authorities' call for Russian 'protection' – after being allegedly targeted by a Ukrainian drone – only highlights the risk of conflict spillover in Transnistria. In the context of the escalated war in Ukraine, Russia's political interference has increased. Hybrid threats include the spread of disinformation and support for political opposition. In Moldova, 'Moscow is succeeding in exploiting Moldova's internal vulnerabilities' (Solik & Graf, 2023, p. 21) through disinformation and political destabilisation. For example, anti-government protests in Moldova in 2022 were linked to the opposition party Shor, which received financing from Russia to pay protesters and transport them to the capital from rural areas (Całus, 2023).

By contrast, a resumption of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh was anything but a surprise. Both the changing balance of power between the two countries and repeated skirmishes in the region rendered an outbreak likely. However, despite early warning signals such as the four-day war in 2016, both the timing and scope of the 2020 war could not have been anticipated. From the EU's perspective, there was also no reason to expect either the blockade or the take-over of Nagorno-Karabakh

by Azerbaijan in 2023. Given the mechanisms (i.e. the deployment of Russian troops with a peacekeeping mission) put in place by the 2020 ceasefire to both ensure transit through the Lachin corridor and protect the contact line, the 2023 events were unexpected. As a result, the region's government surrendered, and some 120 000 ethnic Armenians were displaced. The conflict traumatised Armenian society and shook the foundations of the country's still nascent democracy. It also reignited the deep polarisation that has characterised Armenian politics for years, and which has undermined the functioning of democratic institutions. For instance, the run-up to the 2021 snap elections (which followed Nikol Pashinyan's resignation) was dominated by hateful rhetoric and narratives 'about who had been more patriotic or heroic during the war' (Iskandaryan, 2021). Azerbaijan's take-over of Nagorno-Karabakh was yet another shock for the country.

Role of Non-Western Actors: Russia as a democracy spoiler

A major risk for EU democracy promotion in EN3 countries is Russia's political meddling in the region through various means. Russian interference in the domestic affairs of the neighbourhood countries, while predictable, impedes democratic reform. Even if increasingly present, China's and Turkey's clout cannot be compared to Russia's deeply rooted and multifaceted influence, which stems from shared historical legacies. From the late 2000s, Russia has sought to countervail EU democracy support through its policies of 'managed stability' and 'managed instability' (Tolstrup, 2009), with a view to delegitimising western-leaning authorities and backing Russia-friendly elites. President Putin's active involvement in support of Viktor Yanukovych in the 2004 Ukrainian presidential elections is perhaps the most visible example of this interference. Viktor Yushchenko's subsequent victory, though, came as a massive blow to Russia's direct involvement. This paved the way for the multifaceted use of regional links rooted in a common Soviet past, as leverage to either support or pressure Eastern Partnership countries, depending upon their perceived loyalty. In Georgia, Ukraine and to a lesser extent Moldova, Russia has sought to destabilise (what it perceives as) unfriendly regimes. These regimes have been seeking closer ties with the EU – also with a view to reducing Russian influence – and promising to implement democratic reforms. In Armenia, Russia conducted a policy of 'managed stability' (Tolstrup, 2009) and intervened both directly and indirectly to back the ruling regime and reinforce its control over the country's economy in exchange for its role as a security guarantor.

Russia's agility in tailoring its toolbox to EN countries' changing sensitivities adds further complexity to EU democracy promotion. Indeed, the policy of managed stability and instability cuts across countries and evolves over time in response to domestic or regional change. For example, Russia interferes in the domestic politics of EU associated countries by rhetorically and financially supporting newly emerging pro-Russian politicians and political parties (e.g., Igor Dodon and his socialist party in Moldova). In doing so, Russia seeks to influence domestic policymaking towards the adoption of policies favourable to Russia. This influence is also directed at EN societies: anti-European (and pro-Russian) narratives are disseminated through Russian-language media outlets and the Russian Orthodox Church. Russia's meddling in domestic affairs through this variety of means negatively affects democratisation processes underway in the EN3 countries. These means are, however, difficult to detect because they operate in a covert manner; hence they create uncertainty for the EU and its democracy promotion. Russia's policies and requirements are hardly codified (Ademmer, Delcour & Wolczuk, 2016), in contrast to those of the EU. This is despite the fact that linking rewards to the

fulfilment of specific conditions has been increasingly visible in official narratives in recent years. Moreover, Russia's incentives and disincentives are tailored to the situations of post-Soviet countries. In other words, the fact that Russia's policy in the post-Soviet space is less formalised enables it to adapt its strategy and toolbox to the context of each country. This is also because Russia uses a whole gamut of measures in the post-Soviet space, building on the multifaceted links inherited from the past (e.g. energy, migration, security and trade interdependences).

Overall, Russia has been trying to influence Europe and its neighbourhood through what some have called 'information warfare' (Coffey, 2023). The purpose of Russia's disinformation campaigns, misinformation actions and hybrid activities, is to spread confusion and fear in society, and make people question the correctness of democratic politics. Russia very closely monitors the internal politics of various countries and takes advantage of the conflicts in them. Russia's ability in different countries to use specific problems and adjust its narratives accordingly is noteworthy. In general, Russia is trying to increase polarisation in societies and undermine democratic processes and institutions. Russia boldly finances various political movements in Europe and its neighbourhood within the framework of existing legislation. Local non-profit organisations are funded through sophisticated channels. Politicians who would be willing to pass on Russian narratives are directly paid off. Russian-backed groups carry out cyberattacks on EU Member States and their partner countries in the WB and EN. The Russian state has a notion that Russia is fighting a political war with the west and that it must take advantage of every opportunity to create division and undermine the western agenda in the EU's neighbouring regions (Coffey, 2023).

3. EU RESPONSES TO THE DEMOCRATIC RISKS IN THE WB AND EN

Faced with both opportunities and risks for democratisation, the EU has responded with a combination of upgraded existing instruments, new initiatives employing existing material resources, institutional mandates and some innovations, even if those have not always delivered on their intended objectives. In what follows, we discuss the missed opportunity to anchor liberal democracy in the two regions (WB6 and EN3) via the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies (missed protean moment), the atypical roles assumed by the EU in an attempt to tame the impact of recurring conflicts in the regions on the democracy agenda (conventional tools used for protean ends) as well as the traditional democracy promotion toolbox that the EU has used to try and keep countries on the democratisation path (control power).

3.1. Democracy building through enlargement

The EU's reaction to the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has been to revitalise its enlargement policy and extend the prospect of membership to the WB and EN countries respectively, albeit with a substantial difference in timing. While the EU dismissed the option of membership for post-Yugoslav states during the 1990s, with the notable exception of Slovenia, and only offered the prospect of membership in 2003, this option was already granted to the EN3 during the first year of the Russian invasion of 2022. Retrospectively, this means that with the ENP and even the more recent Eastern Partnership (EaP), the EU had fallen short of providing a clear *finalité* to its relationship with its eastern neighbours, first and foremost Ukraine for which the ENP was initially designed. The lack of a *finalité* has persisted despite successive adjustments to the EU's policy toolbox, which have however been instrumental in bringing eastern neighbours (especially the EN3) closer to the EU.

Many have seen the extension of enlargement policy in geopolitical terms as a security measure intended to stabilise the continent and bring peace to the EU's neighbouring regions (Vachudova, 2014; Anghel & Džankić, 2023). The EU decision to promise conditional membership to more countries in 2003 and 2022 was nevertheless unexpected and came in the context of internal 'enlargement fatigue'. The respective decisions were seen as inconceivable, right up until the moment they were announced. The EU in this sense surprised observers with a policy U-turn that appeared unlikely.

Being a prospective candidate for EU membership changes fundamentally the trajectory of the Western Balkan countries and the EN3 both with respect to their domestic and foreign policies. It has important implications for the democratisation agenda in the accession hopefuls as well. As non-candidates, EU neighbours are encouraged to democratise, but they are not subjected to the Copenhagen political criterion, i.e. the requirement to measure up to EU standards of rule of law and democracy. Expectations for democratic performance in EU candidates are higher than for other neighbours. And although the EU cannot be held solely responsible for the process of political change in prospective members, it can be credited for having altered the calculus of political, business and societal actors in these countries.

The EU's influence in the new democracies of the Western Balkans was mainly channelled through the promise of EU accession. This was a powerful tool for reform in the early 2000s. Notably, in North Macedonia, the first WB state to get candidate status in 2005 (having applied in 2004), the EU promise helped the country usher in new reforms after its 2001 conflict, including considerable reforms in the fields of human rights and rule of law. In the larger context, this was also the period when the EU was preparing for its 2004 enlargement, which saw the expansion of the Union with 10 more states. The promise of membership also enabled the potential of the EU to contribute to reforms and changes within the countries, contributing to administrative social learning and a passive enforcement of EU conditionality (Tocci, 2008) as part of its conflict management toolkit. Since, however, the EU's transformative role in the domestic reform processes of the countries of the Western Balkans has stagnated at best, with the EU accession process having lost the momentum it held in the early 2000s. This stagnation has been both due to enlargement fatigue and the lack of a clear agenda as cited above, as well as the regression of democratic practices in many WB countries.

Lastly, the enlargement promise comes with the obligation for the EU to reform internally, to be able to welcome more members. This is where the EU has shown most reluctance to adapt to the new realities it has helped to create. Serious discussions about internal reform have been postponed. In so doing, it has missed an opportunity to transform itself and make its institutions and polices ready for enlargement. This has also undermined the credibility of its accession offer. The EU was thus unable to take full advantage of its enlargement promise. In that sense, it has failed to benefit from the protean momentum for democratisation in the two regions.

3.2. Political mediation

Faced with political instability in its immediate vicinity, the EU has engaged in atypical behaviour, in the form of political mediation of internal political stalemates and inter-state conflicts in the WB and EN. The EU typically abstains from interfering directly in the domestic political processes of its partner states. This follows a long tradition of refraining from publicly picking sides in internal political battles or elections. Yet, on occasion, when confronted with prolonged internal political deadlocks that threaten to destabilise a partner country or region, the EU has sent diplomatic representatives to try to break the impasse between ruling and opposition political parties. This can be seen in 2001 and 2015 in North Macedonia (FYROM at the time) and in 2021 in Georgia. The negotiation of the Ohrid Agreement[3] in 2001, the Pržino Agreement[4] in 2015 and the so-called '19 April' agreement in 2021[5] under the EU's auspices are examples of EU diplomatic mediation intended to resolve political crises and safeguard democratic achievements in the Western Balkans and South

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[3]https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MK_010813_Frameword%20Agreement%20%28Orhid%20Agreement%29.pdf

[4] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/212828/Przino_Agreement.pdf

[5] Council of the European Union (2021). The political crisis is over, says President Michel in Georgia. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/president/news/2021/04/20/20210421-pec-in-georgia/

Caucasus. On each of these occasions, the EU acted as a 'crisis broker'6 and managed to leverage its material and soft power to get local parties to agree to democratic reforms.

In North Macedonia, the then High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana led the mediation process in 2001 to diffuse tension and civil unrest in the country. In 2015, the then Commissioner for ENP and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn, together with three MEPs (Richard Howitt (UK) from the socialist S&D group, Eduard Kukan (SK) from the conservative EPP group, and Ivo Vajgl (SI) from the ALDE group as a liberal 'non-aligned' MEP), led the internal reconciliation process among political parties in North Macedonia (Fonck, 2018).

In 2021, the President of the European Council Charles Michel engaged with local actors to put an end to the political crisis in Georgia.7 The EU-mediated agreement reached on 19 April 2021 under the auspices of the President of the European Council and his envoy Christian Danielsson formally ended the crisis. The agreement paved the way for the Tbilisi Court's decision to release on bail the leader of the main opposition party (UNM) after the EU posted bail worth approximately USD 11 700.8 The EU-brokered deal also laid the foundations for wide-ranging electoral, judicial and rule of law reforms. These included moving to a fully proportional system for future parliamentary elections, enhancing the selection procedures for judges and conducting a substantive reform of the High Council of Justice (EPRS 2022).9 EU mediation helped defuse the crisis by urging all sides to make concessions. The 19 April agreement appeared promising for reinvigorating the democratic process in Georgia, as it included concrete measures (with a corresponding timeline) to address key political stumbling blocks. Crucially, the EU-brokered deal offered promising avenues to reduce polarisation by fostering an inclusive, cross-party reform process.

The EU has also got involved in mediating conflicts between states when these have threatened to undermine peace and stability in neighbouring regions or endangered the path towards European integration for specific countries. The EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue is the most high-profile example of such activity. Since 2011, the EU has tried to steer negotiations on normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia, with a lead role for EU High Representatives Catherine Ashton, Federica Mogherini and Josep Borrell over the years, and since 2020, for EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajčák (Bargués et al., 2024). More recently, the EU has intervened in an ongoing dispute over divergent historical narratives between Skopje and Sofia, which had been blocking North Macedonia's accession negotiations. A proposal tabled by the French Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2022 (referred to as 'the French proposal') and endorsed by the disputing parties, promised to unblock North Macedonia's stalled accession trajectory (Bechev, 2022a, 2022b). In all these instances, the EU has assumed roles that have transformed its foreign policy actorness and allowed it to project itself as a crisis broker.

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6 https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/05/10/defusing-georgia-s-political-crisis-eu-foreign-policy-success-pub-84494.

7 https://www.euractiv.com/section/eastern-europe/news/michels-mediation-in-georgia-revealed/

8 Civil.ge, 'Court Releases UNM's Melia from Custody', 10.05.2021

9 EEAS, A Way Ahead for Georgia, 19.04.2021

Another tool utilised by the EU in the case of North Macedonia and later Bosnia and Herzegovina has been the Senior Expert's Group, led by the former senior European Commission official Reinhard Priebe. The Group identified the diverse mechanisms used by the government of North Macedonia at the time to maintain power (EU, 2015a). This report was crucial to legitimising the concerns of opposition and civil society actors, and towards building a framework of reform to restore the rule of law. The report was also a crucial stepping stone for the EU's mediation of the Przhino Agreement, which set the stage for the organisation of fair elections (EU, 2015b). The Senior Expert's Group, however, is yet to be utilised in Serbia[10] where the situation is comparative to that of North Macedonia's, due to the policies of the SNS regime, the irregularities of the December 2023 elections, and popular citizen opposition to these. In February 2024, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on Serbia, whereby it called for an investigation into the elections of December 2023 (EWB, 2024).

In the EN, EU efforts to act as a mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan started in late 2021, when the first meeting between Charles Michel, Nikol Pashinyan and Ilham Aliyev took place in the margins of the Eastern Partnership summit. This was followed by a second one in early February 2022. The EU's role as a broker came as a turning point, considering its absence from the conflict settlement mechanism (the so-called 'Minsk Group') and its low-profile during the 2020 war. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU stepped up its role in the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. Tripartite meetings organised under the auspices of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, enabled the leaders of the two countries to discuss the process for the delimitation of their common border, issues related to connectivity and socio-economic development, as well as demining and the fate of prisoners and missing persons. The EU's involvement was welcomed by Armenia and Azerbaijan as it provides an additional platform for dialogue, in parallel to discussions with Moscow and Washington, and, unlike Russia's mediation, comes without bargaining chips (EPRS, 2022b). However, Azerbaijan's nine-month blockade of the Lachin corridor linking Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, and the subsequent takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh, came as strong blows to the EU's role and quest for a balanced approach between the two countries.

By getting involved in political mediation, the EU has relied on diplomatic resources at its disposal. It has deployed these resources, however, for activities that it has hitherto refrained from engaging in. In that sense, the EU can be said to have demonstrated protean power in the cases concerned.

3.3. Direct governance: EULEX and EUAM

Given the difficult context for democracy in conflict-ridden societies, the EU has also improvised through direct governance initiatives. It has taken on state-like responsibilities in cases of limited statehood. This is uncharted terrain for the EU so is a protean mission *par excellence*, even if limited to specific contexts. One example of where it has engaged more directly in administering both local and national level policies is its administration of Mostar (EUAM) (Monar 1997) between 1994 and 1996. Through EUAM the EU tried

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[10] The only other times the Priebe led senior group has been active is in North Macedonia in 2017, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2019.

peacebuilding at the local level, which involved an innovative employment of both peace-making and space-making to limited success (Björkdahl 2012). However, this showed the EU's ability to get involved at the city level, as opposed to the national level, and engage directly with communities. Due to the diverse and complex situation of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina however, it was not able to successfully navigate the space.

In Kosovo, with the establishment of the European Union Rule of Law Mission (EULEX), the EU has once again attempted a more direct approach of engagement. This arguably constitutes its most direct form of engagement attempted at this level. The EULEX in Kosovo, deployed in 2008 is the 'most ambitious mission in CSDP's [Common Security and Defence Policy] history, [seen] as a litmus test for the EU and its capabilities to build democratic systems 'abroad' (Musliu, 2021, p. 1085). The mission of EULEX is to support institutions upholding the rule of law,11 and until 2018 had executive functions in customs, police and judiciary. However, both administrative attempts have raised questions about democracy and the effect on state-building. Thus far, in the Kosovo context too, the EULEX has had mixed success, as it itself has been involved in scandals (Hopkins, 2017). These scandals have shaken EULEX legitimacy.

While both administrations have some innovations, they do not necessarily step away from control power. The EUAM mission was too short lived to make a proper assessment, while EULEX has been present in Kosovo for over ten years. Unlike political mediation where the EU has responded to deep domestic crisis by becoming involved in their resolution, here the EU has rather reacted to more predictable events through mechanisms that rely on control or traditional power. Furthermore, both administrations open questions about democratic legitimacy, and as such offer uncertainties as to the larger role of the EU in democratising countries with which it engages.

3.4. EU democracy support initiatives and instruments

In addition to some occasional innovations, the EU has relied primarily on its traditional democracy support tools (control power) to try and steer the political trajectories of countries from the two regions in a democratising direction. Conventional EU democracy promotion focuses on areas such as elections and electoral observation, development, security, conflict prevention, and post-conflict peace building, in addition to human rights, gender equality and minority rights. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), established in 2006, exemplifies this approach, aiming to support democracy and human rights globally. It views these aspects as interconnected and crucial for achieving the Millennium Development Goals, with democratic processes promoting accountability and government transparency (Landman & Larizza, 2010). In the 2020s, with the growing risk of foreign interference in the democratic politics of partner countries, the EU also extended its democracy support efforts to help partners fend off malign information manipulation from Russia and China, in particular.

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[11] https://www.eulex-kosovo.eu/?page=2,16

3.4.1. Engaging state institutions in the WB6 and the EN3

The most impactful part of EU democracy promotion involves engaging with the state institutions and official leadership of respective countries. After the wars of the 1990s and the uneasy and often turbulent consolidation of democracy, stability became the middle ground. As such, the EU accepted stable rather than fully democratic or fully functioning state institutions. This led to what has been termed 'stabilitocracy' (Bieber, 2017, 2018; Kmezic 2018) as the preferred game in town, as regards the relationship between the EU and the semi-authoritarian governments of the WB. Stabilitocracy is defined as a relation whereby there is an 'exchange of stability for external lenience on matters of democracy' (Bieber, 2017). In EN countries, too, when faced with a democracy-stability dilemma (Börzel & Lebanidze, 2017), the EU has prioritised the latter over the former, though for different reasons (e.g. concerns over country destabilisation or self-assessment of the EU's own limitations as a transformative power).

What this has meant in practice as seen in the WB has been support or leniency towards policies or governments led by increasingly authoritarian leaders, as in Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo during different periods. In the EN3, the fear of provoking Russia has stood in the way of firmly upholding democracy principles. As a result, there has often been a disconnect between EU conditionality and the EU's actions. This has impacted the perception of the EU in the region, particularly among civil society activists. Reforms, especially in rule of law, remain elusive in most countries of the regions, despite long-term engagement with the EU (Kmezic, 2018).

With its most powerful tool – democratic conditionality – not employed to its best advantage, the EU has done its utmost to socialise various WB and EN officeholders. This has been achieved by creating better cooperation between EU institutions and the institutions of the countries from the two regions. For example, the EU has created an initiative emanating from the CIVEX Commission of the Committee of the Regions.[12] The mechanism created is the Joint Consultative Commissions (JCC) and Working Groups (WGs), which bring together local and national actors from the WB/EN and EU Member States. In addition, the EU is also involved in exchanges with members of parliament. One such European Parliament initiative is the Jean Monnet Dialogues, which aims to promote peace through dialogue and mediation. Thus far the Jean Monnet Dialogues have facilitated exchanges with members of parliament in Ukraine, North Macedonia, and Serbia.[13] Another initiative is the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly, which includes participants from the national parliaments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.[14] The vast socialisation programme established at all levels of state institutions, while conducive to long-term positive change, has not had a decisive impact on the political governance in the short run.

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[12] https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/commissions/Pages/civex.aspx

[13] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/globaldemocracysupport/en/mediation-and-dialogue/jean-monnet-dialogues

[14] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/euronest/en/members/members

3.4.2. Engaging CSOs

Leaning on its traditional tools, the EU has also tried to actively involve civil societies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in neighbouring regions. In the realm of promoting democracy, EU institutions predominantly approach civil society beyond their borders in a funding capacity (Khakee & Wolff 2022). In the realm of EU practices on the ground, one can observe a variety of activities conducted by different EU entities, underscoring the significance of local context. These activities encompass capacity building,
fostering dialogue with governments, and coordinating efforts among civil society organisations (CSOs) (Khakee & Wolff, 2022). These approaches enhance the ability of CSOs to present a unified voice and exert influence on decision-making processes. Local CSOs take the lead in many initiatives, shaping the role of EU entities to be more supportive. Concerning financial matters, CSOs are required to seek funding through channels such as the EU Delegation. Delegation personnel actively engage in supporting human rights, not only through direct or indirect funding, but also by sharing best practices with CSOs, organising coordination meetings, and providing assistance upon request. Additionally, EU Member States play a multifaceted role, contributing not only through their embassies with financial support and training but also by condemning human rights violations and torture. They promote dialogue with the government, enhance coordination among CSOs, and leverage their influence on political elites (Dandashly, 2022). Collaboratively, EU Member States, the EU Delegation, and other local or regional CSOs offer training sessions, lectures, workshops, and roundtables to facilitate coordination, support dialogues with the government, and exchange best practices.

A case in point is the 2021 adoption of the Global Europe Civil Society Organisations programme by the Commission, which allocated EUR 1.5 billion for the period 2021–2027. This funding is expressly designed to support civil society organisations outside the EU, recognising them as independent actors contributing to governance, development, and inclusive democratic processes (European Commission, 2021). The EU's systematic engagement with civil society as an interlocutor, though increasing, is not as prevalent. For instance, when the Przhino negotiations were taking place in North Macedonia, civil society activists had asked to be part of the discussions, considering that protests were taking place at the time (Faktor, 2016). However, civil society activists were ultimately not included, though this did not diminish support for EU and US mediation of the agreement.

Between 2014 and 2020, the EU provided about EUR 330 million to civil society and media organisations through its dedicated Civil Society Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye. In the Eastern neighbourhood, civil society platforms, which were created as part of the Association Agreements and the CEPA signed with Armenia, are involved in the implementation of the agreements. The EU has also supported the creation of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, which has been conducive to greater visibility of, and networking among, CSOs in the region. However, the influence of CSOs in national policymaking processes remains overall limited.

The EU channels its support to civil society in the neighbourhood through a multifaceted and evolving architecture. The EU seeks engagement with various actors, including civil society and local authorities, in cases where central governments lack commitment to democratic governance (Landman & Larizza, 2010). Thematic mechanisms, focusing on specific issue areas like democracy and human rights, good governance and anti-corruption, women empowerment, LGBTIQ+ organisations and other marginalised groups, are

exemplified by the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), targeting civil society and media. Even during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EED continued to support CSOs in the country. The EED has also been involved in supporting CSO roles in democracy, fighting corruption, and independent media in both the EN3 and WB (EED, 2023). The Thematic Programme for Civil Society Organisations within the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), specifically addresses NGOs and aligns with development, service provision, democracy, and human rights objectives. The NDICI supports democracy in civil society through regionally based funding instruments such as IPA funds, which includes democracy and human rights programming in the WB and the neighbourhood. In addition, TACSO[15] is a key project financed by the EU as part of the Civil Society Initiative, tasked with improving CSO capacities in the WB and Turkey.

Funding is firmly rooted in a series of EU policy statements and processes, evolving over time, such as the Civil Society Facility (CSF) and European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), in addition to various programmes and initiatives. Key among these are the Council Conclusions on Democracy from 2019, the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy for the period 2020–2024, and the so-called Civil Society Roadmaps. However, despite the 'increased EU funding for CSOs in its neighbourhood following the 2011 Arab Spring, it is a secondary priority in EU aid disbursed in the EN region; aid is directed mainly towards central and local authorities. In the years 2009-2019 grants for CSOs accounted for one-fifth of the EU financial aid' (Deen et al., 2021).

3.4.3. Tackling Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)

With the risk of FIMI gaining magnitude in EU Member States and partner countries alike, the EU institutions have started to develop a comprehensive toolbox to fight the threat at home and abroad. The work to tackle FIMI is now enshrined in the EU's democracy promotion efforts in the WB6 and EN3, building on the assessment that FIMI is a threat to both security and democracy, as well as individual human rights (EEAS, 2023). In this context, the EEAS has proposed a 'response framework to FIMI threats' and rallied the FIMI defence community to adopt a comprehensive approach to addressing the risk, notably in the case of election-related FIMI but also more widely in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (EEAS, 2024). Regarding the WB6 and EN3, the EU's focus so far has been on awareness-raising and resilience-building activities such as organising trainings and information sessions for government officials, civil society organisations, journalists, and independent fact-checkers etc. through the EU Delegations on the ground and the European Parliament and the EEAS in Brussels (EEAS, 2022). This approach rests on the understanding that WB and EN domestic environments are particularly vulnerable to foreign interference, owing to the limited space for media freedom, professional journalism and media literacy. The EU has also tried to counter some of the malign foreign narratives targeting the EU's activities in the respective regions by 'proactive and factual communication' of its own policies in the countries concerned, working with government structures and civil society in parallel (EEAS, 2022, p. 15).

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[15] https://www.tacso.eu/about-us/project-description/

The EU has only recently started gearing up policies to respond to the perceived growing democracy risk for the EU as a whole as well as its partners. The EU can be expected to deepen its engagement with relevant stakeholders from both regions in the future, through continued sharing of best practices and the socialisation of government representatives and civil society actors into predominant EU narratives.

4. CONCLUSION

The dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union presented an enormous opportunity for democratisation in the former communist space. While the two events were experienced as a systemic shock to the security order in Europe, they also opened the door to a more democratic future in the WB and EN countries. The early 1990s was a period of high hope for political transformation following the collapse of the communist system. From the west's perspective, liberal democracy was the only viable option to replace old totalitarian regimes, and the liberal democratic agenda progressively assumed a central role in the west's policy towards eastern Europe (Fukuyama, 1992). While conditions in the WB and EN countries were less favourable compared to countries from central and eastern Europe, the philosophy that underpinned western promotion of democracy in that period was the transition paradigm, or idea that former communist countries were moving in a linear direction towards liberal democracy, albeit with varying success (Carothers, 2002). Indeed, by late-2000s, the WB countries had substantially improved their democratic governance and some EN countries had also made important democratic gains.

These early transition years however also sowed the seeds for later problems regarding democratisation in the regions. While partial reforms helped establish an institutional democratic façade in many of the countries, the old principles of informal governance remained at the core of the new political regimes. This led to enormous difficulties with establishing the rule of law in a domestic context, defined by endemic rent-seeking by office holders and mere imitation of liberal democratic reforms. The brave occasional societal outbursts of pro-democracy energy known as the colour revolutions could not keep a permanent check on predatory elites, who were only interested in prolonging their grip on power and access to state resources. Furthermore, political developments in the last decade shattered any hopes for sustaining the democratic advances seen across the post-communist countries during the early transition years. The prospects for liberal democracy in the WB and EN today look much grimmer than 30 years ago, when the Berlin Wall fell. The EU's democracy agenda has been overshadowed by its security concerns in the WB throughout the last three decades. Eastern European and south Caucasus countries ranked low among the EU's foreign policy goals in the 1990s and democracy promotion was not a top EU priority even after the launch of the ENP in 2004. This has prevented the EU from fully harnessing the protean moment generated by the collapse of the communist system for the democratisation of the WB and EN. The initial success in liberalising the polities of the newly independent states in the two regions was only temporary and was soon replaced by an autocratising trend that the EU has struggled to reverse. Its conditional offer of accession did not hold out its protean promise of democracy building. This missed opportunity to have a decisive impact on political change in the two regions demonstrates how actors can squander the protean potential of specific situations.

This is not to say that the EU did not influence political developments on the ground at all. In fact, on many occasions it showed flexibility and adjusted its actorness to make a difference in politically unstable or security unsafe domestic environments that were hostile to its democracy agenda. In this vein, the EU carved out a role for itself in political mediation, helping break political stalemates in North Macedonia in 2015 and Georgia in 2021, and broker inter-state agreements between Serbia and Kosovo in 2013 and between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2024. These diplomatic breakthroughs helped prepare the ground for more

mundane democracy-enhancing activities in the countries concerned but also shone a new light on the EU's diplomatic actorness. Likewise, the EU took on the uncharacteristic role of direct governance of sub-national units (such as in the town of Mostar in 1994) or of national policy sectors (such as the customs, police and judiciary in Kosovo via EULEX between 2008 and 2018), in an attempt to compensate for the lack of state capacity on the ground and to return the domestic situation to one that is favourable to the overall goals of peace and democracy. In these instances, the EU reacted innovatively within the framework of its existing instruments and deployed its available resources to achieve unexpected results.

Yet, the biggest disappointment from the EU performance as a democracy promoter in the two regions comes from the lack of political will and consensus within the EU to apply a traditional tool that it has learned to master very well – its democratic conditionality. The EU's experience in steering the democratic transformation of its current Member States from central and eastern Europe prior to their accession has raised the expectations of it repeating the careful timing of incentives and disincentives extended to would-be members so as to keep political elites and societies in the countries concerned motivated to persist with democratic reforms. The EU's record in the WB6 and EN3 falls short of these expectations, partly owing to the inconsistent application of rewards and punishments, and the accompanying loss of trust in the fairness of the process by the candidates. The EU's democratic conditionality tool has thus fallen victim to the EU's wider security objectives, with the EU failing to leverage its strongest instrument to advance democracy in the two regions. The EU has nevertheless shown inventiveness in boosting its democracy support toolbox to

make a difference

where it can. This has been the case in its engagement with civil society actors, especially in domestic environments defined by a shrinking space for civil society activism. The EU has also been gearing up its tools to fight against foreign information manipulations and interference in response to Russia's malicious campaigns in partner countries and Member States. Banking on its control power resources, it has done what it can to keep the hope of democracy alive in some segments of the population in neighbouring regions.

Overall, in responding to the democratic risks and uncertainties in the WB and EN, the EU has relied primarily on its control power based on material and ideational resources. It has however failed to harness the full potential of its control power, owing largely to its prioritisation of pragmatic over normative goals in the two regions. It has also missed on the opportunity to ride on the success of its democracy promotion through successive rounds of enlargement in central and eastern Europe and carry over the protean momentum for democratisation from the 1990s into the 2000s and beyond. While it has contributed in meaningful ways to political change in many of the WB and EN countries, its democratic impact has largely declined in the last decade.

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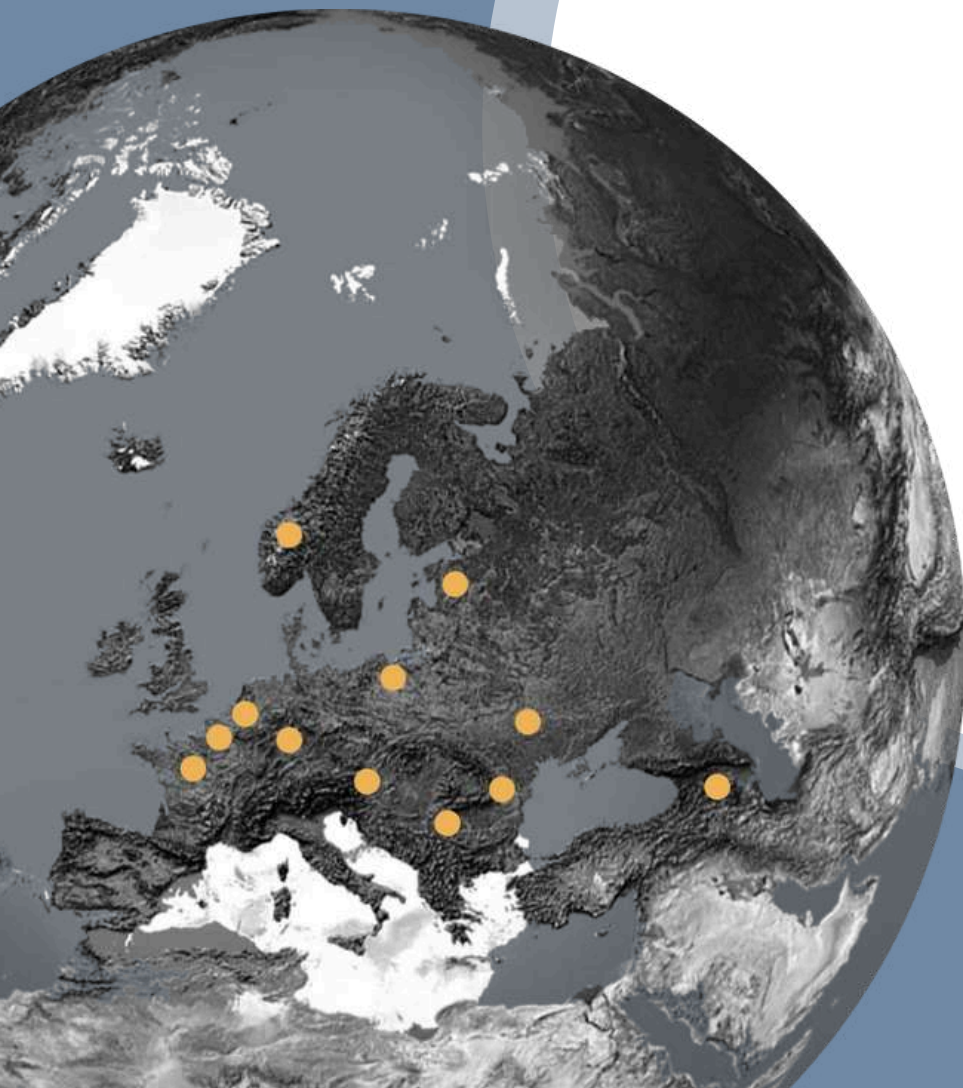
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