



# ENGAGEMENT, ENLARGEMENT AND ESTRANGEMENT

EU Democracy Promotion and Protection  
in its Eastern Neighbourhood in-between  
Three Relational Paradigms

REUNIR – OCCASIONAL PAPER

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**REUNIR – OCCASIONAL PAPER ON EU DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND PROTECTION IN ITS EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD  
IN-BETWEEN THREE RELATIONAL PARADIGMS (ENGAGEMENT, ENLARGEMENT AND ESTRANGEMENT)**

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## Executive Summary

The EU's democracy promotion defines much of the Union's engagement with its Eastern neighbourhood and further afield. Yet the democratization progress among the EU's Eastern neighbours has proven to be uneven and, in some cases, even reversible. Russia's all-out military invasion of Ukraine has only further exacerbated domestic and regional politics in Eastern Europe, making democratic reform stand second to security considerations and, thereby, opening space for a renewed push of autocratization. Against the backdrop of this critical juncture and the related arguable change in the EU's policy from promoting to protecting democracy in its Eastern neighbourhood, this paper enquires into the established and emerging practices of the EU's differentiated democracy support, focusing on three discernible foreign-political 'relationalities': enlargement, engagement and estrangement (3Es). Putting relationship at the epicentre of analysis in the EU's democratization/counter-autocratization dynamics vis-à-vis its Eastern neighbourhood, this paper embraces the 'relationality' perspective and thereby brings in insights from IR to the hitherto pursued democratization and European studies approaches. In so doing, the paper compares and contrasts how the 'values, wallets and walls', as the three roughly corresponding rationalities of the EU's democracy promotion and protection through 'enlargement, engagement and estrangement', have manifested throughout the past three decades in the EU's relations, especially with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – and to what end so.

This paper posits that, in spite of notable progress in building EU-style democracies and would-be member states in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine over the past three decades, the democratic course across the countries and within the region is both unsustainable and reversible, necessitating the prioritization of democratic stabilization and protection first. This defensive turn in EU democratization/counter-autocratization politics, while long in the making, has only crystallized in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Domestic temptations of transactionalism in foreign policy, overlain by the regional trends of cresting illiberalism, great-power competition, as well as the global struggle between democracies and autocracies, make Europe's 'frontline democracies' prime targets for authoritarian offensives. The EU's shift to geostrategic enlargement towards the region helps mitigate some of the external illiberal pressures and hedge against democratic backsliding in wartime Eastern Europe. While this new relationality dimension proves to have, by and large, stabilized Ukraine's and Moldova's democracy building, the lack of credibility of the EU accession prospect, as well as too cautious non-enlargement conditionality pursued in the EU's relations with Georgia, among other factors, have altogether failed to shield the country from illiberalism.

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# CONTENTS

<b>1. INTRODUCTION: ZOOMING IN ON ‘RELATIONALITY’ IN EU DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND PROTECTION.</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1. ‘RELATIONAL IR’ AND RELATIONALITY PARADIGMS IN EU-EASTERN NEIGHBOUR RELATIONS .....	7
<b>2. THE AUTOCRATIZATION CHALLENGE: EPISODES OF DEMOCRATIZATION AND AUTOCRATIZATION IN THE EU’S EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD SINCE 1990 .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3. WHY TURNING? FROM PROMOTING DEMOCRACY TO PROTECTING (FRONTLINE) DEMOCRACIES IN THE EU’S EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>4. THE EU’S ‘DEFENSIVE TURN’ AND THE SHIFTING ENLARGEMENT, ENGAGEMENT AND ESTRANGEMENT PARADIGMS IN EU-EASTERN NEIGHBOUR RELATIONS .....</b>	<b>21</b>
4.1. ‘ENGAGEMENT’: FROM DEMOCRATIZATION/EUROPEANIZATION TO DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE .....	24
4.2. ‘ENLARGEMENT’: FROM FATIGUE AND A NON-OPTION TO GEOPOLITICAL NECESSITY .....	40
4.3. ‘ESTRANGEMENT’: FROM ‘CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT’ TO DISENGAGEMENT AND COUNTER-AUTOCRATIZATION .....	54
<b>5. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>64</b>

## List of Figures & Tables

<b>FIGURE 1</b> EU-NEIGHBOUR RELATIONAL SPECTRUM: ENLARGEMENT, ENGAGEMENT, ESTRANGEMENT .....	9
<b>FIGURE 2</b> CUMULATIVE DEMOCRATIZATION AND AUTOCRATIZATION EPISODES IN EU'S EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD (1990-2023) .....	12
<b>FIGURE 3</b> DEMOCRATIZATION EPISODES OVER TIME IN ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN, BELARUS, GEORGIA, MOLDOVA AND UKRAINE (1990-2023) .....	13
<b>FIGURE 4</b> AUTOCRATIZATION EPISODES OVER TIME IN ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN, BELARUS, GEORGIA, MOLDOVA AND UKRAINE (1990-2023).....	13
<b>FIGURE 5</b> DEMOCRACY STATUS IN EU'S EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD ACCORDING TO BTI 2006-2024 .....	17
<b>FIGURE 6</b> V-DEM POLYARCHY 1990-2023 (DOWN) INDICES .....	17
<b>FIGURE 7</b> THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE FROM 2013 TO 2023 IN EAP COUNTRIES' POLICY CONVERGENCE WITH THE EU AND THEIR STATE OF DEMOCRACY, GOOD GOVERNANCE AND THE RULE OF LAW .....	29
<b>FIGURE 8</b> EU DEMOCRACY SUPPORT TO EAP COUNTRIES: FUNDING BY EU INSTITUTIONS .....	33
<b>FIGURE 9</b> EU'S 2024-WITHHELD/REALLOCATED FINANCIAL AID TO GEORGIA.....	60
 <b>TABLE 1</b> SHIFTING LOGIC OF EU ENGAGEMENT WITH ITS NEIGHBOUR STATES WITHIN AND BETWEEN ENLARGEMENT, ENGAGEMENT AND ESTRANGEMENT PARADIGMS .....	23
<b>TABLE 2</b> EU ACCESSION PATHS OF GEORGIA, MOLDOVA AND UKRAINE.....	43

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## ZOOMING IN ON 'RELATIONALITY' IN EU DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND PROTECTION

The EU's democracy promotion defines much of the Union's engagement with the (Eastern) neighbourhood and further afield – and it found its way to the vast share of scholarly literature that addresses the EU's values-based foreign policy in general and its (normative, transformative, democratizing, etc.) power in particular. Yet the democratization progress among the EU's Eastern neighbours has proven to be truly sporadic, episodic and, in some cases, even reversible – thus, by and large, unsustainable. Russia's all-out military invasion of Ukraine has only further exacerbated domestic and regional politics in Eastern Europe, making democratic reform stand second to security considerations and, thereby, opening space for renewed push of autocratization. Against the backdrop of this critical juncture and the related arguable change in the EU's policy from promoting to protecting democracy in its Eastern neighbourhood (EN), this paper enquires into the established and emerging practices of the EU's differentiated democracy support (seen in contrasting light as the underlying counter-autocracy politics), focusing on three discernible foreign-political relationalities: *enlargement* (differentiated integration and staged EU accession), *engagement* (foreign-political cooperation, association, conditionality, alignment) and *estrangement* (contestatation, sanctions, disengagement, isolation). In so doing, the paper compares and contrast how the 'values, wallets and walls', as the three roughly corresponding rationalities of the EU's democracy promotion/protection through 'enlargement, engagement and estrangement', have manifested in distinct periods of time in the EU's dyadic and mini-lateral relations especially with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia – and to what end so, given the varied record of progress in democratization and the troubling crescendo of autocratic tendencies in the region.

The EU's democratizing power and posture in the neighbourhood region has usually been seen in the shadow of its past successes with transforming post-Communist CEECs into fully-fledged democracies as they joined the Union, giving rise to the encompassing and lasting debate about the European Union's 'transformative power'<sup>1</sup>. By and large, and until recently, the spectacularly successful democratic transformation of the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) on their way to the EU since the mid-1990s and until mid-2000s serves as an often-cited evidence of the EU's 'transformative power' and 'democracy building through enlargement'. The EU's current enlargement round(s) to the countries of South-Eastern Europe, comprising Western Balkan and Eastern European accession hopefuls, adds to the mission 'democratic self-preservation' and 'democracy protection through enlargement'<sup>2</sup> as well. Yet, this represents an emerging approach and a moving target, rather than a fully accomplished shift. The policy-shaping community calls on the EU to rethink the political conditions of EU enlargement and heavily invest in both EU accession acceleration as well as enhancement of effective and sustainable participatory democracy within acceding states *before* they join the EU – and, thus, to pursue the

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<sup>1</sup> Grabbe, H. (2006). *The EU's Transformative Power: Europeanization through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>2</sup> Delcour, L., L. Pollozhani, F. Bieber, I. Burmester, A. Dandashly, M. Kmezcic, & G. Noutcheva. (2024). The origins and evolutions of the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies in the area of democracy promotion. *REUNIR D2.3* (June 2024), p.17.

so-called ‘Copenhagen *plus*’ rationale<sup>3</sup>. Such an approach would focus on a broader range of democratic reforms and encourage a more organic and citizen-driven process, not least by involving citizen assemblies, initiatives, and funding for civic actors to ensure accountability and democratic resilience.

Beyond the enlargement paradigm, the EU’s democratic norm-making authority and influence on democratic transition – and with it, EU-style state-building through various means of socialization, learning, conditionality and both norm and rules diffusion – got furthermore captured in the growing body of ‘Normative Power Europe’<sup>4</sup> and ‘Europeanization’<sup>5</sup> literatures.

Further on, at the intersection of European and democratization studies, the accounts of ‘linkage and leverage’ (and ‘governance’) deepen the enquiry into the specific mechanisms through which EU democratic norm diffusion and third-country democratization occur<sup>6</sup>. Understood as either the support for grassroots democratic demand in target countries or the ‘links’ as such (that is, the presence, variety and density of economic, political, diplomatic, organizational and people-to-people ties), ‘linkage’ finds resonance in studies on EU-Eastern neighbourhood relations on its own<sup>7</sup>. The linkage-and-leverage analyses, too, emerge. As Bădulescu and Tomini note<sup>8</sup>, the instrumentality of ‘linkage’ is rooted in the logic of appropriateness, whereas ‘leverage’ builds on the logic of consequentialism. Lavenex and Schimmelfennig observed<sup>9</sup> that, in addition to ‘linkage’ (i.e., bottom-up support for democratic forces in third countries) and ‘leverage’ (i.e., top-down inducement of political elites to democratic reforms through political conditionality) as traditional models of EU democracy promotion in the neighbourhood, the advent of the ENP and its regional dimension – EaP – as well as the emerging network of broadly-scoped bilateral agreements (AAs of sorts) allowed the Union also increasingly pursue as well a new – third – model that chiefly rests on functional cooperation between public administrations, i.e., the ‘governance’ model. Thus, in addition to focusing on society or polity at large, sectors got increasingly targeted as well in order to achieve a more efficient democratic governance. Moreover, as the political links between the EU and its partner and then associated countries grew, the EU’s engagement became more complex and multi-level, with EU Agencies acting as vehicles of rule transfer to the Eastern neighbours, as well as the latter ones gaining access to EU sectoral bodies and programmes, thus advancing a higher-level relationality within ‘(external) differentiated integration’<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Panchulidze, E., & Youngs, R. (2024). Beyond the Copenhagen Criteria: Rethinking the Political Conditions of EU Accession. *Carnegie Europe*, 05.06.2024

<sup>4</sup> Manners, I. (2002). Normative power Europe: a contradiction in terms?. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2), 235-258.

<sup>5</sup> Schimmelfennig, F. (2009). Europeanization beyond Europe. *Living Reviews in European Governance*, 4(3), 1-28.

<sup>6</sup> Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2006). Linkage versus leverage. Rethinking the international dimension of regime change. *Comparative Politics*, 379-400.

<sup>7</sup> Sasse, G. (2013). Linkages and the promotion of democracy: the EU's eastern neighbourhood. *Democratization*, 20(4), 553-591.

<sup>8</sup> Bădulescu, C., & Tomini, L. (2025). Resisting Autocratization? The EU’s Response to Autocratization in its Neighbourhood. Introduction. *European Politics and Society*, forthcoming, p.4-5.

<sup>9</sup> Lavenex, S., & Schimmelfennig, F. (2011). EU democracy promotion in the neighbourhood: from leverage to governance? *Democratization*, 18(4), 885-909.

<sup>10</sup> Lavenex, S. (2015). The external face of differentiated integration: third country participation in EU sectoral bodies. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 22(6), 836-853; Tyushka, A. (2017). Building the neighbours: The EU’s new Association Agreements and structural power in



Interested in *how the EU has pursued the democratization agenda thus far in relations with its Eastern neighbours and how (and how well?) it deals with the autocratization challenge within the region, as well as what to make of its now-debated defensive turn in democracy promotion*, this paper builds on the propositions from the above-discussed linkage, leverage and governance literatures. Arguing herewith, however, that the EU-neighbour state relational quality and depth itself is both reflective of, and consequential for, the democratization drive, process and outcomes, this paper sees linkage-as-leverage and therewith brings in the so far missing International Relations – and in particular ‘relational IR’ – perspective<sup>11</sup>.

### 1.1. ‘Relational IR’ and relationality paradigms in EU-Eastern neighbour relations

‘Relational IR’ came with a recent – yet another – ‘turn’ in the discipline<sup>12</sup>. The proliferation of ‘turns’ of sorts and ‘turn talk’ overall has it that a half-joking, half-serious saying emerged: if in doubt – turn! And yet, and truism risk notwithstanding, ‘relational turn’ appears both natural and analytically seminal to unveil the patterns of EU-driven democratization and counter-autocratization in its neighbourhood. After all, *relationality* is at the crux of ‘making the neighbourhood’ and interacting with it. Relationality can be best conceived of as a way of approaching relational ontology and the constitutive logic of international social interaction. With such a focus on the social interaction dynamics and the processes rather than actors, relationalism is considered by some as the ‘new constructivism’<sup>13</sup>. Kurki’s thought-provoking 2020 volume on ‘relational cosmologies’ of IR<sup>14</sup> opened a broad discussion on relations and relationism, and the field of enquiry therewith. In a posterior special issue of *Review of International Studies*, she identified a big paradox in the discipline in that, although it includes the word ‘relations’ in its name, the mainstream IR has largely failed to provide an account of what it means to think relationally<sup>15</sup>? This intellectual curiosity soon gained traction. Relational models started attracting scholarly attention, such as the notions of ‘stranger’ and ‘estrangement’<sup>16</sup> or ‘enlargement’<sup>17</sup>. More recently, *International Relations* published a special issue advancing ‘alter-IRs’ as approaches to bringing climate change into IR theory

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the Eastern neighbourhood. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 25(1), 45-61; Rimkutė, D., & Shyrokykh, K. (2019). Transferring the acquis through EU agencies: The case of the European neighbourhood policy countries. In *The external dimension of EU agencies and bodies*, ed. by Inglesse, M., et al. (pp. 183-203). Edward Elgar Publishing.

<sup>11</sup> An earlier, shorter version of this paper appeared as: Tyushka, A. (2025). *Values, wallets, and walls: Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the EU’s shifting democracy promotion and protection relationalities in its Eastern neighbourhood*. *European Politics and Society*, forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> Kurki, M. (2020). *International relations in a relational universe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Berenskötter, F., & Nymalm, N. (2021). States of ambivalence: Recovering the concept of ‘the Stranger’ in International Relations. *Review of International Studies*, 47(1), 19-38; Lipschutz, R. D. (2024). Beyond International Relations and toward International Relationality? *International Relations*, 38(3), 427-434.

<sup>13</sup> McCourt, D. M. (2016). Practice theory and relationalism as the new constructivism. *International Studies Quarterly*, 60(3), 475-485.

<sup>14</sup> Kurki (2020), *supra* n. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Kurki, M. (2022). Relational revolution and relationality in IR: New conversations. *Review of international studies*, 48(5), 821-836. Here p.821.

<sup>16</sup> Berenskötter & Nymalm (2021), *supra* n. 12

<sup>17</sup> Sloomaeckers, K. (2023). Europeanisation as negotiated transitions: Towards a relational and transnational approach to EU enlargement. In *Coming in: Sexual politics and EU accession in Serbia* (pp. 25-49). Manchester: Manchester University Press.



and practice<sup>18</sup>. Such a suddenly growing scholarship on relational IR/relationality only vindicates Kurki's 2022 premise of a 'relational revolution' in IR<sup>19</sup>.

The rise of *the social* in IR takes on democracy promotion has long been noted<sup>20</sup>, but left largely neglected in empirical enquiries.

In regional context, the focus on relationality in Central and Eastern Europe only burgeons, however, with a literal *handful* of contributions chiefly enquiring into enlargement as a relational practice of 'reinscription of otherness'<sup>21</sup>, illiberal relational entanglements and ontologizing anxieties or senses of nostalgia<sup>22</sup>. Within the studies of EU external action and democracy promotion, the relational approach – whilst innate and inherently present in any and every analysis – has only recently attracted an explicit and dedicated treatment. In their relational view of 'differentiated cooperation' in EU external relations, Nicolaidis et al.<sup>23</sup> treat differentiation in relations as an actor-defining characteristic, indicative as well of the type of relational strategies, interaction forms and outcomes.

Putting relationship at the epicentre of analysis in the EU's democratization/counter-autocratization dynamics vis-à-vis its Eastern neighbourhood, this paper embraces the 'relationality' perspective and thereby brings in insights from IR into the hitherto pursued democratization and European studies approaches. By developing a relational analytical approach to the EU-Eastern neighbour interactions within democratization/autocratization spectrum, this paper taps into the emerging debate on democratic backsliding and illiberal/authoritarian diffusion and, in particular, the pertinent question of how the EU does – and should – counter autocratization at home and abroad<sup>24</sup>?

There is more than meets the eye (and the paper's scope allows) when it comes to assessing the EU's lasting, vast and manifold democracy-building efforts across its Eastern neighbourhood countries. This paper's relational perspective on the notion and the process is cast with an eye on *three relational/interaction paradigms*, each with their own mechanisms and instruments: *enlargement* (comprising EU accession conditionality; enlargement methodology, benchmarking; gradual accession; differentiated integration; relationship downgrading), *engagement* (association; foreign aid and market access conditionality; dialogue; monitoring; reporting; relationship up/downgrading), and *estrangement* (dissociation/distancing; shaming; aid/contact suspension; economic and other sanctions; relationship downgrading). In a way, the focus on the relational dimension allows

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<sup>18</sup> Lipschutz (2024), *supra* n. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Kurki (2022), *supra* n. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Schmidt, J. (2015). *Rethinking Democracy Promotion in International Relations: The Rise of the Social*. London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>21</sup> Kuus, M. (2004). Europe's eastern expansion and the reinscription of otherness in East-Central Europe. *Progress in Human Geography*, 28(4), 472-489.

<sup>22</sup> Michelsen, N. (2022). Relationality in Central and Eastern Europe. *New Perspectives*, 30(2), 143-147.

<sup>23</sup> Nicolaidis, K., in collaboration with A. Bradley, S. Merlo, P. Puertas, and R. Symank. (2021). Differentiation, dominance and democratic congruence: A relational view. *EU3D Research Papers*, 21 (December 2021).

<sup>24</sup> Bădulescu & Tomini (2025), *supra* n. 8.

us to bridge the discussion of EU linkage-and-leverage as correlational vehicles of EU-induced democracy promotion and protection.

The *three relational (interactionist) paradigms* in EU-Eastern neighbour relations – i.e., *enlargement, engagement and estrangement* (3Es) – render themselves well to an intuitive understanding even without conceptualization. Essentially, they represent distinct relational ontologies of amity and enmity, as well as kinship (e.g., the ‘European family’ metaphor) and, thus, varied degrees in quality, density and consequentiality of links on the ever-closer to ever-looser ties continuum (Figure 1).

*Figure 1 EU-neighbour relational spectrum: enlargement, engagement, estrangement*



Source: author's own elaboration

In critical and sociological IR tradition, the focus on the 3Es here provides prime cues into what constitutes the fabric of relation, that is, the EU's relationality vis-à-vis neighbour countries, as well as, importantly, what kind of *relational* actors both are? Withal, a crucial distinction can be made between an interaction (the usual focus of analysis) and relation (an outlook pursued herewith), with the latter one encompassing a whole range of perceptual, identitarian, attitudinal and performative dimensions that often get neglected in surficial interaction/transaction-focused accounts. In other words, with relations coming as prior to actors or their transactions, a relational outlook pursues an 'ontology of relations', rather than an 'ontology of things', prioritizing process over substance or structure. In such a 'logic of relationality', relations determine the logic of action.

Consequently, each of the relational paradigms differently informs both the EU's democracy promotion rationale and repertoire, as well as the neighbour countries' reception, legitimation, legalization and transposition of EU-induced democracy building (Table 1). Effectively, the design, the process and the outcome of EU-style democratization vary from paradigm to paradigm. Conversely, the assumption is as well that counter-autocratization dynamics would differ, too.

Whereas more detailed discussion follows in the respective three sections below, it appears well-suited to briefly outline the 3Es in the context of this study on EU democratization/counter-autocratization. Repeatedly present in the EU's relational agenda in the past, '*enlargement*' was formally enabled as the logic of interaction with the EU's Eastern neighbours only in mid-2022 as, in response to Russian full-scale aggression on Ukraine, the EU embarked on 'geostrategic enlargement' experiment. Traditionally, though, EU enlargement is seen as the most successful 'tool' in democratic transformation as, through the accession process, the EU pursues the tested and elaborate 'member state-building' programme. Commitment to 'common values' is both the utmost precondition for accession and the successful undertaking of EU member state rights and obligations. In turn, '*engagement*' presents a quasi-'default' (constitutionally mandated by Article 8 TEU post-Lisbon) relational approach in the EU's interactions with the neighbours, encompassing a broad range of bilateral, mini- and multilateral formats of non-enlargement relations. Within its immediate vicinity, the 'ENP neighbourhood', '*engagement*' operates on the enlargement-modelled political conditionality principle, offering financial and other rewards ('wallets') in exchange for progress on commitments, including democratic reform. Whilst the golden carrot of enlargement is denied (explicitly not offered nor being credible), the agenda of an EU-style 'neighbour state-building' is nonetheless advanced. Finally, '*estrangement*' not only comes as a strange form of interaction – it is also EU-atypical, and thus exceptional, *modus operandi*. Yet, estrangement is no stranger in the EU's relational repertoire, manifesting varied othering and distancing practices of figurative (visa/'paper wall') and real (border fence) 'wall-building'. The democratic status and direction of transformation are key in the EU's switch to estrangement: shaming and othering (critical engagement), rhetorical or diplomatic walls (discursive disengagement), sanctions, paper walls (visa regime imposition) and physical walls (border fences) – all are meant to counter democratic backsliding/autocratization.

Rather than delving into the complex microcosms of the EU's multiple and multi-layered policies and both within- and cross-policy undertakings, this paper casts a helicopter view on relational types and interaction features between the EU and select Eastern neighbours, keeping a key focus on the relationship design and dynamics. The extensive temporal analytical frame spanning over three past decades, too, urges a narrowing down of the empirical case sampling. From among six EU Eastern neighbours (EN), this paper zooms in on what used to be known as the 'Association Trio' or the 'associated EaP3' – that is, the group of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Only these three Eastern neighbours entered the EU enlargement agenda post-2022, and only they have, therefore, experienced the broadest relational offer with the EU spanning engagement, enlargement and estrangement interaction paradigms. Furthermore, to a varying extent, but still, all three countries experienced democratization and autocratization episodes in their political transformation.

In what follows, this paper proceeds first with empirical observations on the state of democracy in the EU's EN region largely relying for data on the renowned indices of democracy, all pointing to cyclical, uneven, and mostly reversible trends in democratization and with it, the rising challenge of autocratization. Against the backdrop of multiple recurring democratization and autocratization episodes, as well as external democracy contestations discussed next, the paper further dwells on the EU's overdue shift from democracy promotion to protection, particularly discernible in the wake of Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Ultimately and substantively, the paper uncovers this imminent shift *within and across* the EU's three relational paradigms with the Eastern neighbours, that is, '*engagement*' (the 'default' and conditionality-driven form of interaction),

‘enlargement’ (one that prioritizes integration and commitment to common values above all) as well as ‘estrangement’ (or the form of dissociation and disengagement, involving elements of coercion through sanctions).

## 2. THE AUTOCRATIZATION CHALLENGE: EPISODES OF DEMOCRATIZATION AND AUTOCRATIZATION IN THE EU’S EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD SINCE 1990

EU’s Eastern neighbourhood (EN) countries exhibit diverse and divergent democratic trends, with some experiencing episodic democratic breakthroughs, others suffering from recurrent stasis or democratic backsliding, while yet another – smaller – group remaining authoritarian or deepening their authoritarian regression.

Spikes of democratic breakthroughs (usually, in the form of revolutions) enjoy incredible attention in political discourses as well as scholarly studies. Equally, the failures of democratization and the dangers of autocratization in the region remain a recurring topic in political and scholarly debates. Within the EU’s EN, democratization and de-democratization (autocratization), Europeanization and de-Europeanization, consent alongside internal and external contestations, as well as other tensions *do* co-exist and co-evolve, sometimes swapping the trends entirely within recurrent ‘twists and turns’<sup>25</sup>.

Given the momentous character of such developments and oftentimes observed stasis, or lack of development in either democratization or autocratization direction thereafter, it appears more suitable to speak of ‘*episodes*’ – rather than ‘waves’ – of democratization or autocratization in the EU’s EN. There’s a burgeoning sense of it in the wider literature on democratization and autocratization, as ‘episodes’ or ‘moments’ gain a growing scholarly attention<sup>26</sup>. The V-Dem Institute’s 2020-launched ‘Episodes of Regime Transformation’ (ERT) dataset tackles the issue by providing insights into such ‘episodes’, that is, ‘periods when a country undergoes sustained and substantial changes along a democracy-autocracy continuum’<sup>27</sup>. Disturbingly, the V-Dem’s ERT dataset, reveals a cresting illiberal turn, as the number of autocratizing countries disproportionately increases, whereas the number of democratizing ones sharply drops, leading to the growing debate about global ‘democratic

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<sup>25</sup> Tyushka, A. (2020). ‘Twists and Turns of Democratic Transition and Europeanisation in East-Central Europe Since 1989: Betwixt EU Member and Neighbour State-Building’. *Croatian Yearbook of European Law and Policy*, 16, 133–177.

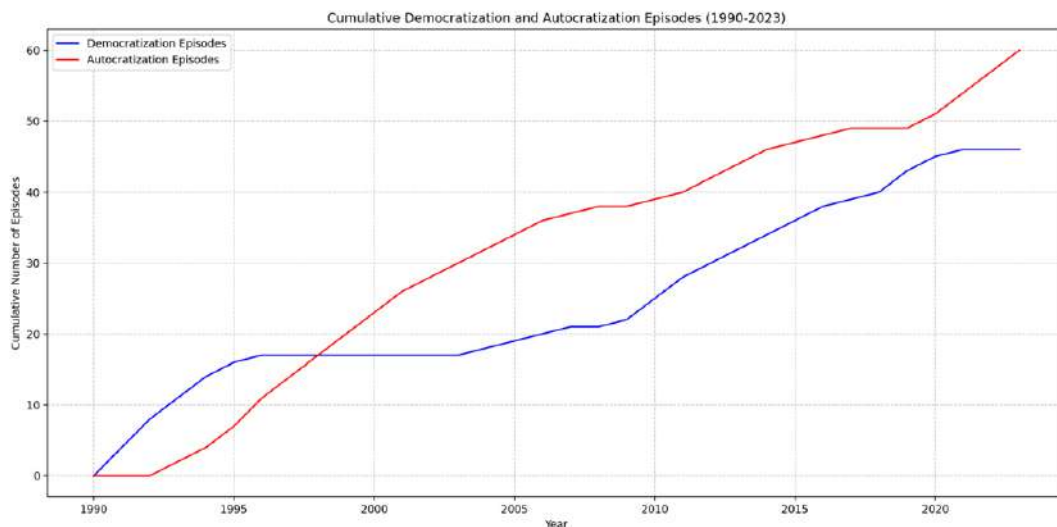
<sup>26</sup> Tomini, L. (2021). Don’t think of a wave! A research note about the current autocratization debate. *Democratization*, 28(6), 1191-1201; Boese-Schlosser, V., Edgell, A. B., Hellmeier, S., Maerz, S. F., Sato, Y., Wilson, M. C., & Lindberg, S. I. (2024). Identifying episodes of autocratization. In A. Croissant and L. Tomini (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Autocratization* (pp. 65-76). London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>27</sup> Coppedge M., et al. (2020). V-Dem Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset v10, <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds20>, here p.6. See also: Maerz, S. F., Edgell, A. B., Wilson, M. C., Hellmeier, S., & Lindberg, S. I. (2021). A framework for understanding regime transformation: introducing the ERT dataset. *V-DEM WP*, 113 (February 2021), <https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/wp113.pdf>; Maerz, S. F., Edgell, A. B., Wilson, M. C., Hellmeier, S., & Lindberg, S. I. (2024). Episodes of regime transformation. *Journal of Peace Research*, 61(6), 967-984.

recession'<sup>28</sup>. As Boese et al.<sup>29</sup> carefully observe, an unprecedented 36 democratic regimes have broken down since 1992, triggering autocratization processes in more countries than ever before. To compare: in 2003, 35 countries were democratizing whereas three times less – 11 countries – were on the autocratization track; in 2023, only 18 countries kept their democratization course, whereas already twice as many – 42 countries – pursued the path of autocratization.

Likewise, across the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, both episodes of democratization (liberalizing autocracy, democratic deepening) and autocratization (democratic regression, autocratic regression) are frequent and gravitating to the latter trend. In the period from 1990 until 2023, the V-Dem ERT recorded altogether 46 democratization episodes and 60 autocratization episodes, thus confirming that, in cumulative and region-wide terms, autocratization risks overhauling democratization (Figure 2). Country-wise and timewise, however, there is, promisingly, much more variety (Figures 3 and 4)<sup>30</sup>. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have all experienced three episodes in democratic breakthroughs for the past three decades, with Armenia's key episode of democratic transition and consolidation having lasted throughout the 2010s. This notwithstanding, their autocratization periods, too, recurred, in each decade, with Georgia remaining, until the 2020s, a rare exception. Azerbaijan's and Belarus' early-1990s brief democratic openings soon got replaced with lasting moments of autocratic regression and deepening.

**Figure 2** Cumulative Democratization and Autocratization Episodes in EU's Eastern neighbourhood (1990-2023)



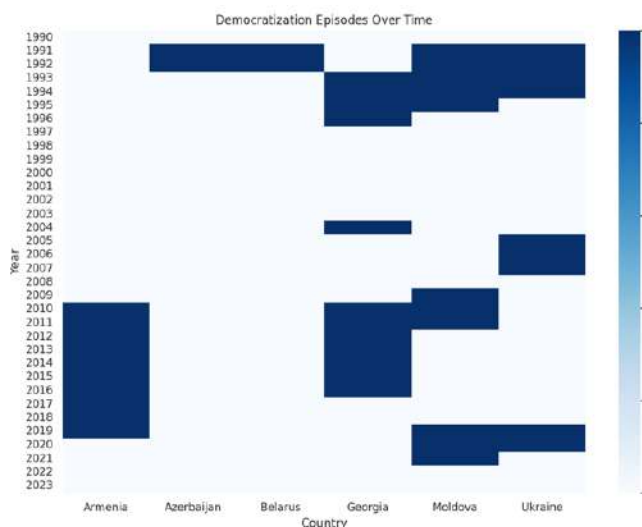
Source: author's own, based on V-Dem ERT data (ERT dataset V14, March 2024, <https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/ERT/releases/tag/V14>)

<sup>28</sup> Diamond, L. (2024) How to End the Democratic Recession: The Fight Against Autocracy Needs a New Playbook. *Foreign Affairs*, 103(6), 126-140

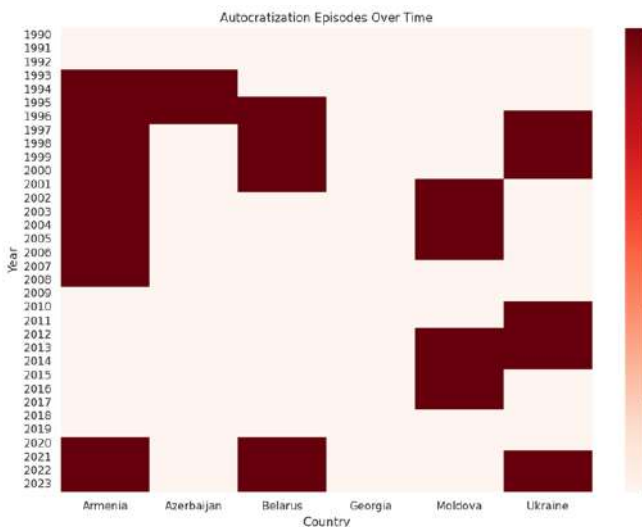
<sup>29</sup> Boese, V.A., S.I. Lindberg & A. Lüthmann (2021). Waves of autocratization and democratization: A rejoinder. *Democratization*, 28(6), 1202-1210.

<sup>30</sup> Georgia's post-2024 democratic backsliding (or, arguably, even an autocratic turn) is not yet captured in the 2024 ERT dataset. At the same time, ERT's formal indicators point to an increasing autocratization trend in Ukraine post-February 2022, discounting thereby the state of active war, the effects of martial law, including infeasibility of holding elections, and other justifiable – for wartime – restrictions on democratic rights and liberties.

**Figure 3** Democratization Episodes over time in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (1990-2023)



**Figure 4** Autocratization Episodes over time in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (1990-2023)



Source: author's own, based on V-Dem ERT data (ERT dataset V14, March 2024, <https://github.com/vdeminstitute/ERT/releases/tag/V14>)

The EU's neighbourhood, since its post-Soviet rebirth, evidently has not been an 'easy' place for democracy promotion.

In his take on 'democracy in hard places', Way<sup>31</sup>, too, considers regime transformation developments in the so-called 'post-Soviet space' as manifestations of 'democratic moments'. These occurred in the broader context of multiple transformations, as the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a 'triple transition' spanning nation-building, economic restructuring, and political change in former Soviet republics. Add to that, the countries of the EU's 'Eastern neighbourhood' simultaneously fall within Russia's self-declared 'sphere of influence', its 'near abroad'. This geopolitical and geostrategic 'in-betweenness' is more than an issue of geographic positioning: it defines much of the in-between states' social, political and legal cultures, identities, their strategic cultures as well as a typical – 'swinging' – foreign-political behaviour<sup>32</sup>, making, thus, the observed alternation of democratization and autocratization episodes less surprising. The persisting – 'hybrid' – nature of political regimes across the EU's EN, with unfinished transition either way, further enables frictionless drifting between democracy and autocracy.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the former Soviet socialist republics (re)gained independence and embarked on extensive economic and political transformations. Throughout the 1990s, all the post-Soviet states experienced periods of political instability, which adversely impacted their social and economic conditions. Notably, the political and economic reforms were both selective and incomplete. In all post-Soviet states, the persistence of informal practices and networks shaped the landscape, creating a continuum with formal – and

<sup>31</sup> Way, L.A. (2022) Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine: Democratic Moments in the Former Soviet Union. In: *Democracy in hard places*, ed. by S. Mainwaring & T. Masoud (pp.128-159). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>32</sup> Tyushka, A., & German, T. (2025). Geostrategic 'inbetweenness' as a (mis)fortune of Eastern European neighbours of Russia and the European Union. *European Security*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2025.2580246>.



in many cases democratizing – institutions. Civil society and opposition parties became marginalized due to the centralizing tendencies of their governments and the rise of autocratic leadership style within both democratizing and non-democratic countries of the region, which at best manifested the emergence of hybrid regimes<sup>33</sup> – the so-called ‘hybrid democracies’ (Georgia, Armenia) or ‘competitive authoritarianism’ (Ukraine, Moldova) – alongside further consolidation of autocratic rule (Belarus, Azerbaijan). Secessionist and ethnic territorial conflicts across what now forms the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood (save, initially, for Belarus and Ukraine) further perplexed the transition to democracy and democratic institution-building. Nominal democratic features, especially of electoral democracy, long co-existed with autocratic governance, thus making analysts speak nearly in unison about ‘façade democracy’ or ‘faking democracy’ in the post-Soviet space<sup>34</sup>.

This dualism, or co-existence, of nominal democratic institutions and increasing restrictions levied upon opposition, with lacking instruments of participatory democracy for wider society, against the background of rampantly democratizing East-Central Europe, often prompted public protests in virtually all countries of the region (save Azerbaijan). These unanticipated ‘positive’ shocks in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus manifested, in the 2000s, in the form of ‘colour revolutions’, that is, nonviolent pro-democracy movements that resulted in governmental changes in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004, 2013/14), and Armenia (2018). Yet, Belarus’s 2006 Denim Revolution and 2020 Slipper Revolution both proved suppressed and unsuccessful. Moldova’s 2009 Twitter revolution, too, was short-lived.

Yet, the early successes of democratic transition following ‘colour revolutions’ proved being reversible, as de-democratization episodes took place in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and, in the wake of 2020 war with Azerbaijan, in Armenia, alongside further authoritarian regression observed in Belarus and Azerbaijan. In the 2010s, Moldova’s façade democracy crumbled in the face of pervasive elite corruption, and Ukraine’s hard-won democratic change got undone with Yanukovich’s brief but pervasively autocratic rule. The 2013/14 revolution, while usually seen in the context of bringing Ukraine back to European integration and the eventual conclusion of the Association Agreement with the EU (hence, the label ‘Euromaidan Revolution’) has at the same time pursued the constitutional and democratic renewal agenda (hence, its other – more current in domestic discourse – name the ‘Revolution of Dignity’). Initially not giving a sign of trouble, the rise of the Georgian Dream to power in Georgia in 2012, slowly, and then suddenly, brought about democratic backsliding since 2020 and vehemently so in the last two years.

Once a leader in the EU integration race and the most enthusiastic supporter of democratic transformation and European choice, Georgia slowly and then suddenly seems to have slipped into authoritarianism. Shook by the early-1990s wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and struggles with the breakaway regions, Georgia spent decades building democratic institutions, cultivating civil society and firmly inserting itself on the Western/European agenda, keenly accelerating its pro-EU and pro-democracy development since the 2003 Rose revolution. Though, in late 2007 already, Saakashvili’s growingly personalist rule signalled the possibility of backsliding. The Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the aftermath political era slowed down the process

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<sup>33</sup> Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press. [here chapter 3: Linkage, Leverage, and Democratization in Eastern Europe].

<sup>34</sup> Wilson, A. (2018). *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*. New Haven: Yale University Press



and the political contestation from within only grew. It only got re-dynamized after the transition of power in 2012 to the European future-promising political force, the Georgian Dream, and particularly after Georgia concluded with the EU the Association Agreement with the DCFTA component in 2014. Until 2020, Georgia had been among the champions of democratization, Europeanization and European integration in the region, sometimes second only to Moldova. In 2019, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party announced changes to the electoral code for its own favour, securing the unprecedented – third – win in the autumn 2020 parliamentary elections. Domestic dissent in opposition and society grew since then, and so did social and political polarization, leading to the adoption of illiberal measures by the government. Yet, substantial and systemic democratic backsliding, if not an autocratic turn, occurred two years later.

The impact of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 on the region and Georgia in particular cannot be overestimated. Two radical – and directly opposing – turns have taken place: Georgia suddenly received a long-sought EU candidate status and, at the same time, the country made a U-turn in its foreign policy, moving ever further from its European choice and future. Domestically, this U-turn translated into serious democratic backsliding: suppression of months-long popular protests, illiberal legislation and political targeting of dissent among both elites, CSOs and citizens, politicization of the judiciary and other illiberal measures that border on authoritarianism.

Tbilisi's democratic collapse is sudden and staggering – but certainly not unique: it is part of the international trend.

Georgia's flirting with authoritarianism needs to be seen in a broader geopolitical and temporal context: domestically nurtured, it is externally incentivised and 'transplantable' as a model, not least thanks to authoritarian idea and playbook diffusion, and arrives with more subtle action covered with seemingly democratic (in fact: populist) rhetoric, as well as contemporary authoritarianism is dressed in law. It is the populist allure and legal cover that defines much of contemporary autocratization in the region, calling the EU to reconsider its hitherto pursued democracy promotion approach taking on more determined and sharper instruments in protecting existing democratic spaces from regression.

### 3. WHY TURNING?

#### FROM PROMOTING DEMOCRACY TO PROTECTING FRONTLINE DEMOCRACIES IN THE EU'S EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

Over the past few years, public and political discussions intensified about an overdue and imminent shift in EU democracy promotion in the neighbourhood. While long in the making, the Union's transitioning to a more assertive and defensive approach in democracy support was torpedoed by the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine. This '*defensive turn*', first dubbed by Youngs<sup>35</sup> in 2024, ensued in response to the combination of external and internal (f)actors urging the EU to reassess, rethink and redesign its democracy promotion so as to more forcefully pursue the long-overdue democracy protection within and beyond the Union's neighbourhood. These five key drivers are as follows:

*First* and foremost, the state of democracy across the EU's Eastern neighbourhood for the past three decades is, *prima facie*, deeply diverse and features a *whole mix of dynamics along the democratization-autocratization continuum*: from democratic progress to regression, stabilization, stasis, through democratic backsliding to autocratic consolidation and authoritarian deepening<sup>36</sup>. The frequency of democratic upheavals and revolutions (in Ukraine alone – three revolutions since 1990!), as well as the sequencing of bureaucratic counter-revolutions (whether 2010-2014 blue counter-revolution in Ukraine, or 2012-2022 counter-revolutions in Georgia) points to short-lived effects of democratic breakthroughs that collapse, or gradually fade, under the pressure of domestic and external illiberal counter-forces.

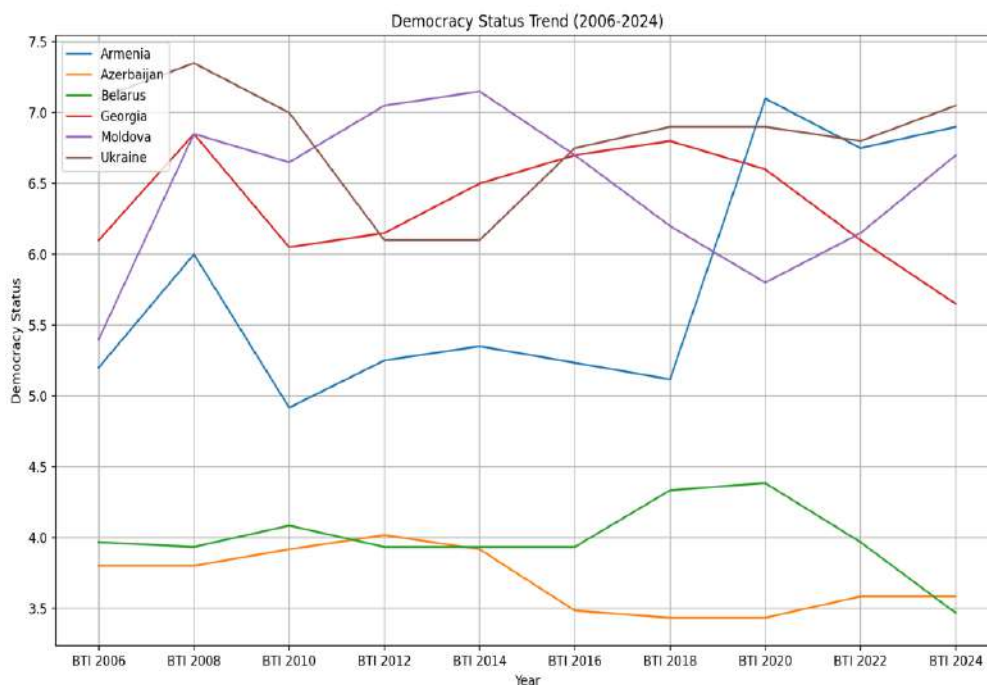
Renowned democracy status-tracking indices such as the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) or the V-Dem Institute's Polyarchy Index, in spite of varied methodologies, glaringly show such ups and downs, pointing to the mostly sinusoidal – and thus unsustainable – democratization; two exceptions are Belarus and Azerbaijan, whose autocratic stabilization post-2000s shows a stable deepening trend (Figures 5 and 6).

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<sup>35</sup> Youngs, R. (2024). The Defensive Turn in European Democracy Support. *Carnegie Europe*, 14.03.2024.

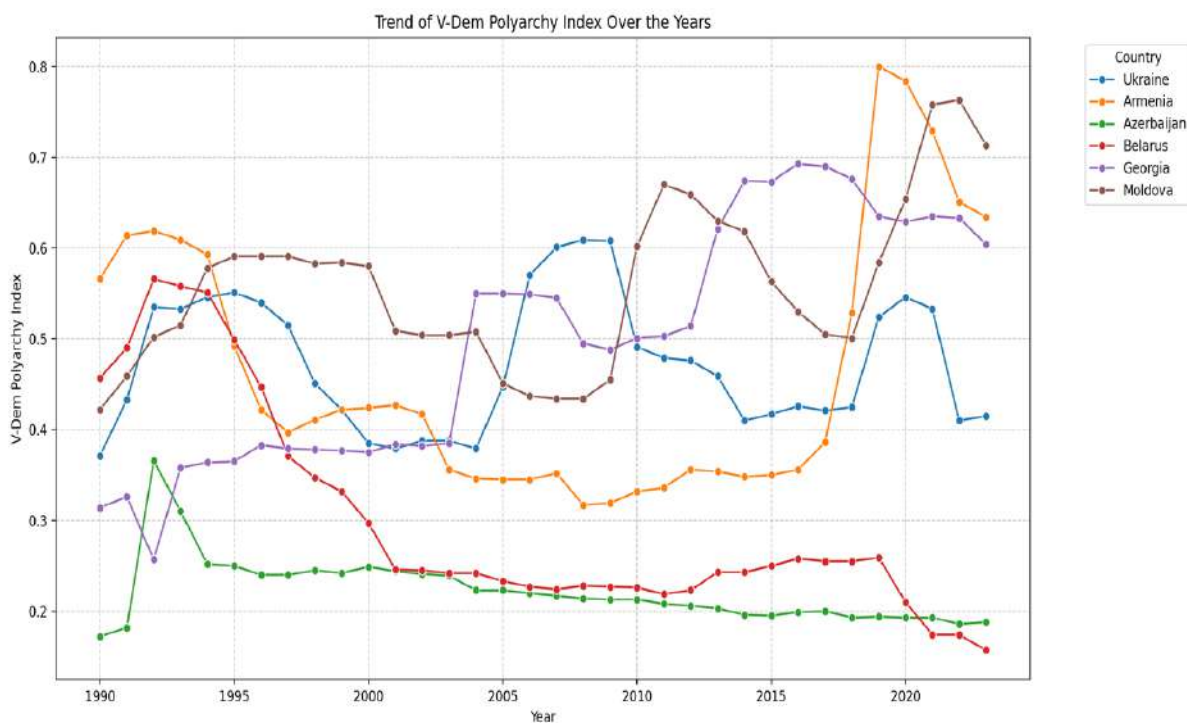
<sup>36</sup> Dobrescu, M., & Weilandt, R. (eds). (2024). Democratic progress, stasis, regression and authoritarianisation in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. *REDEMOS Working Paper D4.1* (May 2024), DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.13981634.

**Figure 5** Democracy status in EU's Eastern neighbourhood according to BTI 2006-2024



Source: author's own, based on BTI 2006-2024

**Figure 6** Democracy status in EU's Eastern neighbourhood according to V-Dem Polyarchy Index 1990-2023



Source: author's own, based on V-Dem Polyarchy index 1990-2023

*Second*, the EU's *democracy support paradigm and practice* as such (encompassing growingly more symbolism than substance), both at home and especially abroad, has *eroded*.

Europe is experiencing a democratic recession, with one of the sharpest declines (since 2006) in democratic values, erosion of civil liberties, and a rise in both populism and authoritarianism<sup>37</sup>. This decline challenges classical democratic concepts and impacts EU foreign policy, leading to contested domestic debates, obstructed decision-making, and reputational damage. Between 2007 and 2017 alone, the V-Dem Institute reclassified Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia from liberal democracies to electoral democracies. The rise of illiberal actors, particularly in Hungary, further complicates the EU's ability to project democratic norms and influence abroad.

The EU's internal democracy and rule-of-law crisis is thought to undermine its credibility as a democracy promoter abroad<sup>38</sup>. However, emerging empirical research shows little evidence of deterioration in the EU's image as a democracy promoter in its eastern and southern neighbourhoods, where the EU's role in democracy promotion has not yet visibly suffered from the rule-of-law crisis in the EU<sup>39</sup>.

The complexity of EU democracy promotion through norm diffusion has increased. Along with selective rule adoption and 'cherry picking' practices, whereby EU neighbour states adopt sensible EU-promoted governance norms but reject liberal-democratic values in part or entirety, instances of simulating, of faking, norm reception have proliferated<sup>40</sup>. This adds to the persisting challenges of adopting versus implementing externally-induced norms in domestic contexts, or parallel transposition of competing (democratic and non-democratic) norms.

Furthermore, much of the opposition to EU norms is internal to the countries in question, rather than a simple binary opposition between the EU and other external powers. Various domestic actors either support or resist EU-promoted liberal-democratic norms, with some preferring to adapt these norms to local traditions. Such resistance to EU-promoted democratic norms comes not only from governments but also from segments of societies that question certain liberal rights.

In certain national contexts, the EU's democracy promotion efforts seem to have become more symbolic than substantive, pointing out the weakening of its commitment to enforcing democratic norms, primarily as pragmatism (also known as 'principled pragmatism') arrived as a guiding principle of the EU's engagement with near and farther neighbourhoods.

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<sup>37</sup> Bochsler, D., & Juon, A. (2020). Authoritarian footprints in Central and Eastern Europe. *East European Politics*, 36(2), 167-187; Kelemen, R.D. (2025). Will the European Union escape its autocracy trap? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 32(2), 341-364.

<sup>38</sup> Bouchet, N., K. Godfrey & R. Youngs. (2022). Rising Hostility to Democracy Support: Can It Be Countered? *Carnegie Europe*, 01.09.2022; Balfour, R. (2024). Europe's Contested Democracy and Its Impact on the EU's Democracy Support Policies Toward Its Neighbours. *SHAPEDEM-EU WP*, 3 (March 2024).

<sup>39</sup> Burlyuk, O., A. Dandashly & G. Noutcheva. (2024) External democracy promotion in times of internal rule-of-law crisis: the EU and its neighbourhood. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31(3), 900-924.

<sup>40</sup> Wilson (2018), *supra* n. 34.

A number of analyses observe that the EU's democracy promotion in its eastern and southern neighbourhoods has yielded 'unintended consequences', both domestically and externally<sup>41</sup>. While the EU aimed to strengthen liberal reform coalitions, its support has inadvertently empowered illiberal groups, discrediting the EU in the eyes of local populations. Furthermore, the EU's socio-economic support and security cooperation have inadvertently strengthened authoritarian regimes, undermining its stated objectives of promoting democracy.

*Third*, in addition to *problems with democracy worldwide* and a certain 'democracy fatigue' epidemic in Central and Eastern Europe<sup>42</sup>, the persistent and consolidating *rise of illiberal values and diffusion of authoritarian norms* has it that the majority of the world's population lives in autocracies. In 2003, for instance, the share of the world's population already living in autocracies stood at 50% – and even further grew to 71% in 2023; the share of those who were living in autocratizing countries (including democratic ones) also grew from 7% in 2003 to 35% in 2023<sup>43</sup>. Strikingly, in Eastern Europe, 66% of the population lived in 2023 in electoral autocracies, with 27% populating electoral democracies and only 5% – in liberal democracies<sup>44</sup>. This observation led many to affirm that the '*third wave of autocratization*' has arrived<sup>45</sup> – and further spreads through authoritarian norm diffusion<sup>46</sup> and cooperation<sup>47</sup>.

*Fourth*, waves of *autocratization and democratization clash* both globally and regionally<sup>48</sup>. Recurrent de-democratization/autocratization episodes in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood also got overlain, since the 2010s, by the global 'democracy vs autocracy' struggle, which renders regional contestation a wholly new scale and magnitude. Largely uncontested earlier, EU democratic norm diffusion in the neighbourhood now incrementally faces geopolitical competition and external contestation from Russia, Turkey, China, Iran<sup>49</sup>, with their agendas

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<sup>41</sup> Dandashly, A., & Noutcheva, G. (2019). Unintended Consequences of EU Democracy Support in the European Neighbourhood. *The International Spectator*, 54(1), 105-120.

<sup>42</sup> García-Rivero, C. (2023). *Democracy Fatigue: An East European Epidemy*. Budapest: CEU Press.

<sup>43</sup> Holdinghausen, H. (2024). Demokratie in Daten. *Böll Thema* 24-2, 14.10.2024, <https://www.boell.de/de/2024/10/14/demokratie-daten>

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Tansey, O. (2016). *The International Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Bank, A. (2017). The study of authoritarian diffusion and cooperation: comparative lessons on interests versus ideology, nowadays and in history. *Democratization*, 24(7), 1345-1357; Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it? *Democratization*, 26(7), 1095-1113; Boese, V. A., Lindberg, S. I., & Lührmann, A. (2021). Waves of autocratization and democratization: a rejoinder. *Democratization*, 28(6), 1202-1210; Benedek, I. (2025). Populist autocratization and populist electoral autocracies: towards a unified conceptual framework. *Comparative European Politics*, 23(3), 331-352.

<sup>46</sup> Bank (2017), *supra* n. 45.

<sup>47</sup> Erdmann, G., A. Bank, B. Hoffmann & T. Richter. (2013). International Cooperation of Authoritarian Regimes: Toward a Conceptual Framework. *GIGA Working Papers*, 229.

<sup>48</sup> Boese et al. (2021), *supra* n. 45; Angiolillo, F., Lundstedt, M., Nord, M., & Lindberg, S. I. (2024). State of the world 2023: democracy winning and losing at the ballot. *Democratization*, 31(8), 1597-1621; Emerson, M. (2024). Strengthening Europe's Democratic Identity and Security in a More Autocratic World. *REUNIR Inaugural Lecture*, June 2024.

<sup>49</sup> Youngs, R. (2022). Re-examining norms-diffusion: the EU, democracy and rival powers. *Democratization*, 29(3), 545-552.

of an ‘alternative model’ promotion<sup>50</sup>. Symptomatically, post-2010s trends in de-Europeanization and de-democratization/autocratization have been increasingly linked to Russian authoritarian influence<sup>51</sup>. Moreover, authoritarian norm diffusion seems to gain as much traction and effectiveness as democratic norm diffusion does – and the practices of authoritarian learning and socialization are equally consequential<sup>52</sup>.

Resultingly, the lines between norm diffusion and power politics blur. While Russia, Turkey, and Gulf states oppose the EU’s norm-diffusion agenda across its immediate neighbourhoods, they don’t always promote an alternative set of norms, all too often embracing *Realpolitik* instead. This puts the EU with its values-based foreign policy (normative actorhood) and democratic norms promotion efforts in a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis external power challengers who are not bound by norms or rules. This complicates the EU’s external strategies, where cooperation with authoritarian regimes continues despite the EU’s normative agenda.

Finally, *fifth*, while issues with democracy and democratization proliferated for a while, *the Russian all-out military invasion of Ukraine brought war to Europe* and has abruptly shattered the EU’s ‘peace, prosperity and stability’ mantra, urging it to act – and act differently than before. *Defence of democracy in Ukraine and Europe further afield has risen to the EU’s new mission*.

Beyond the Ukraine invasion, Russia’s escalating hybrid warfare against the EU’s Eastern neighbours and the EU itself proliferates, employing tactics like strategic corruption, co-optation, sabotage, disinformation, and cyberattacks. Conjoined by other illiberal allies, including China and Iran, and given their disruptive technologies of political manipulation and repression, Western democracy ‘weaponization’<sup>53</sup> or ‘subversion’<sup>54</sup> as well as their global war on democracy<sup>55</sup> more generally, the global scale of the authoritarian threat urged to defend democracy both locally and globally. As Power bluntly put it: ‘*Democracy is not in decline. Rather, it is under attack*’<sup>56</sup>. This requires resolve and action within and beyond the EU and its neighbourhood. It is in the EU’s (Eastern) neighbourhood, however, where the deciding battle unfolds, immensely elevating the critical role of ‘frontline democracies’ like Ukraine, Georgia or Moldova<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Dandashly, A., & Noutcheva, G. (2022). Conceptualizing norm diffusion and norm contestation in the European neighbourhood: introduction to the special issue. *Democratization*, 29(3), 415-432, here p.415; Youngs (2022), *supra* n. 49.

<sup>51</sup> Cameron, D.R., & Orenstein, M.A. (2012). Post-Soviet Authoritarianism: The Influence of Russia in Its “Near Abroad”. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 28(1), 1-44; Delcour, L., & Wolczuk, K. (2015). Spoiler or facilitator of democratization? Russia’s role in Georgia and Ukraine. *Democratization*, 22(3), 459-478.; Hall, S.G. (2023). *The authoritarian international: Tracing how authoritarian regimes learn in the Post-Soviet space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>52</sup> Hall (2023), *supra* n. 51.

<sup>53</sup> Kamusella, T. (2024). Russia: Weaponizing democracy to better fight the West. *New Eastern Europe*, 03.04.2024, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2024/04/03/russia-weaponizing-democracy-to-better-fight-the-west/>

<sup>54</sup> Schedler, A. (2024). Rethinking democratic subversion. In *The Routledge Handbook of Autocratization*, ed. by A. Croissant & L. Tomini (p.19-36). London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>55</sup> Dobson, W.J., & Masoud, T. (2023). Introduction: The Hidden War on Democracy. In: *Defending Democracy in an Age of Sharp Power*, ed. by W.J. Dobson, T. Masoud & C. Walker (JHU Press); Kollaros, V. (2023). The geopolitics of democracy: The US against Russia and China. *European View*, 22(2), 269-276.

<sup>56</sup> Power, S. (2023). How Democracy Can Win: The Right Way to Counter Autocracy. *Foreign Affairs*, 102(2), 22-37, here p.34.

<sup>57</sup> Youngs (2022), *supra* n. 49; Wiesner, C. (2024). The War Against Ukraine, the Changing World Order and the Conflict Between Democracy and Autocracy. In *The War Against Ukraine and the EU: Facing New Realities*, ed. by C. Wiesner and M. Knodt (pp. 83-109).



## 4. THE EU'S 'DEFENSIVE TURN' AND THE SHIFTING ENLARGEMENT, ENGAGEMENT AND ESTRANGEMENT PARADIGMS IN EU-EASTERN NEIGHBOUR RELATIONS

Ever-complex and contested democracy promotion in EU foreign and neighbourhood policy agendas long necessitated a deep rethink and remodelling. The regional geopolitical earthquake prompted by the Russian 2014 hybrid invasion of Ukraine's south-east, including the annexation of Ukrainian Crimea, put many developments in motion. It triggered the EU's increased attention to state and societal resilience at home and abroad, reassessment of the practice of democratic conditionality across the formats of EU external relations as well as, importantly, it urged the EU to securitize democracy pursuing democratic hedging and defence – and thereby counter-autocratization (albeit the latter one is not expressly present as such in EU policy vocabulary). While not abandoning democracy promotion, this complementary shift to democracy protection got catalysed and crystallized in the wake of Russia's February 2022 attack on Ukraine, and with it, on regional security order and the liberal democratic international order at large.

According to Youngs's pioneering account<sup>58</sup>, the *defensive turn in EU democracy support* entailed policy adaptation efforts chiefly within three axes: (1) safeguarding democratic space; (2) democracy support as order protection; and (3) internal-external links. In practical terms, this shift involves indirect support for activists, prioritizing less overtly political themes, and backing grassroots civic groups, thereby defending basic social capital and civic agency rather than promoting systemic transformation<sup>59</sup>. Altogether, these reprioritizations amount to a transition from proactively expanding democracy to protecting existing democratic spaces both at home and in the near abroad.

Earlier – broader – accounts posit that democracy promotion and protection are, in principle, two sides of the same coin. Schmitter and Brouwer, for instance, argue<sup>60</sup> that, seen conjointly as a subset of international politics of democratization, *democracy promotion and protection* consists of 'all overt and voluntary activities adopted, supported, and (directly or indirectly) implemented by (public or private) foreign actors explicitly designed to contribute to the political liberalization of autocratic regimes, democratization of autocratic regimes, or consolidation of democracy in specific recipient countries'. Thereby, while focusing on engagements across all target levels (individual citizens, civil society, political society, including political parties and interest groups or

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Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland; Sabanadze, N. (2023). EU-Georgia Relations: A Local Show of the Global Theater. *Carnegie Europe*, 16.11.2023; Tocci, N. (2024). Georgia is on the frontline of the struggle between Russia and the west. Will its democracy survive? *The Guardian*, 15.07.2024.

<sup>58</sup> Youngs, R. (2024). The Defensive Turn in European Democracy Support. *Carnegie Europe*, 14.03.2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/03/the-defensive-turn-in-european-democracy-support>.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Schmitter, P.C., & Brouwer, I. (1999). Conceptualizing, Researching and Evaluating Democracy Promotion and Protection. *EUI Working Paper SPS*, 99/9, here p.12.



political movements, and state institutions), democracy promotion efforts pursue political liberalization and democratization as a goal, whereas democracy protection focuses, in addition, on democratic consolidation<sup>61</sup>.

Leininger, too, regards ‘democracy support’ and ‘democracy protection’ as two subtypes of ‘democracy promotion’<sup>62</sup>, with differing rationales and objectives in that the former is sought to foster democratization (by strengthening pro-democratic actors and facilitating reforms of institutions) and the latter – to counter autocratization (by protecting pro-democratic actors, countering autocratic forces and preventing reversal of institutional reforms). Importantly, she outlines six phases of regime change in which democracy promotion takes place either in the form of support for democratization (autocratic regression; democratic transition; democratic deepening) or democracy protection (democratic regression; transition to autocracy; autocratic deepening)<sup>63</sup>.

Takes in the democratization and (counter-)autocratization literatures significantly vary as to whether democracy promotion and protection aren’t more of the same. Terminological variety and distinct uses of the same terms – democracy support vs assistance vs promotion vs protection vs defence, etc. – do not help bring about clarity and consensus either.

In the context of EU foreign policy and geopolitics of democracy, the distinctness and the ‘defensive shift’ itself are more pronounced, albeit not much nuanced yet.

First and foremost, the EU’s posture in international relations changed: a normative and liberal power Europe, once denouncing the use of force, engages in wartime neighbour defence and geostrategic expansion, not infrequently resorting to coercion and engaging in geopolitical confrontation and other means bordering on, but not crossing, power politics. If there were a keyword capture of these two distinct postures, perhaps ‘Euroliberalism’ and ‘Eurorealism’ would fit best (Table 1).

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44.

<sup>62</sup> Leininger, J. (2022). International democracy promotion in times of autocratization: From supporting to protecting democracy. *IDOS Discussion Paper*, 21/2022, here p.5.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6-12.

**Table 1** Shifting logic of EU engagement with its neighbour states within and between enlargement, engagement and estrangement paradigms

Time shift	Paradigm shift	Shifting logic of EU engagement with its neighbour states		
		Enlargement	Engagement	Estrangement
2004–2022	Democracy promotion (‘Euroliberalism’)		Democratization (democracy promotion, NPE)	
			Europeanization (EU neighbour-state building)	
			Political cooperation frameworks (ENP, EaP)	ignorance → ‘critical engagement’ → ‘principled pragmatism’
			positive and negative conditionality	negative conditionality; sanctions
			EU Foreign Aid & Special Funding Instruments (ENPI, ENI, NDICI, EaP Solidarity Fund)	suspending EU aid to gov’ts
Post–2022	Democracy protection (‘Eurorealism’)	EU accession n/a	Differentiated integration (AA/DCFTA+, CEPA): trade liberalization and EU market access conditionality; visa liberalization; participation in EU agencies; joint/association bodies;	Differentiated disintegration; participation suspension, exclusion (ENP/EaP-)
		state and societal resilience-building vs hybrid threats (security, capacity) → democratic resilience /survival (democracy hedging)		societal resilience (CSO support)
		democratic deterrence (containing democratic backsliding, societal mobilization for democracy/containing de-democratization; containing authoritarian contagion)		counter-autocratization (containing autocratic deepening and contagion)
			sanctions	
			Political cooperation frameworks (ENP, EaP, EPC)	isolation and exclusion from coop. frameworks (BY out of EPC); ‘paper walls’ and real walls (fencing off)
		EU Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)	EU Foreign Aid & Special Funding Instruments (ENPI, ENI, NDICI, EaP Solidarity Fund)	Suspending EU aid to gov’ts & increased CSO support
		Europeanization (EU member-state building)	Europeanization (EU neighbour-state building)	
		EU accession track (‘geostrategic enlargement’): enlargement prospect as protection against autocratization (‘frontline democracies’ embrace)		reversing EU accession as signaling/containment vs. autocratization
		EU’s RoL revolution → enforceable EU values/RoL convergence		
		Staged accession (‘accession acceleration’)		

Source: author’s own.

Essentially defining the EU’s hitherto effort in democracy promotion, ‘Euroliberalism’ encompasses an EU’s self-entitled role of a ‘force for good’ in its near abroad, where its liberal-democratic allure and normative power long remained unmatched and uncontested, and thus devoid of confrontational posturing or zero-sum logic in interactions with the neighbouring and regional powers. Within the Euroliberalism paradigm, EU democracy promotion largely unfolded in a full disregard of external competitors and a competing authoritarian allure, betting on democracy as the only game in town.

‘Eurorealism’ – not yet in the classical sense of the paradigm – has arrived with the EU’s decadal ‘geopolitical awakening’ that was accomplished only in early 2022. It entails, as observed, a growingly assertive role of a democracy defender both at home, regionally, and globally (Summit 4 Democracy), with the EU no longer hesitating to confront challengers from within the neighbourhood or third/competing great powers like Russia or China. Zero-sum logic has entered the EU’s foreign policy calculations at large (with the pursuit of the first-ever geopolitical enlargement) and its democracy protection efforts in particular (where democracy resilience and defence get prioritized in geostrategic and survivalist thinking, that is securitized, which ‘excuses’ compromises on value commitment elsewhere). Notably, Eurorealist-style democracy support – whether one thinks of it as democratization ‘in khaki’ or as ‘militant democracy’ – features more geopolitical and rule-of-law assertiveness, confrontation, autocratization contestation and containment of authoritarian diffusion at home and abroad. EU’s informal recipe of counter-autocratization appears to be pursuit of democratization at all odds, accompanied by democratic resilience-building and deterrence of autocratization.

In that, Eurorealism does not necessarily entail a 180-degree turn on the EU's values-driven external policies, nor does it apply a shift to crude *Realpolitik* either, remaining thus a calibrated hybrid power posture. Some observers call this new – hybrid – EU posture a 'geoliberal Europe'<sup>64</sup>, that is, one where neither the EU's long-practiced 'standard' notions of liberal and normative power nor classical *Realpolitik* suffice to define the EU's actorness on their own and thus are fused together.

Put shortly, the EU's *defensive turn in democracy support* for the past ten years accrued, as observable, to the following *fivefold agenda*: (1) fixing democracy at home; (2) pursuing democratic resilience; (3) ensuring democratic survival; (4) weighing democratic deterrence; (5) embracing democracy defence (militant democracy).

In substance, the EU's broadened democracy support – now expressly including both promotion and protection rationales – demonstrates continuity and change in policies, mechanisms and tools repertoire (Table 1). New instruments have emerged, and some more are in the making to help complement – not substitute – the continued ones. Crucially, one more paradigm in the EU's relationality with its Eastern neighbourhood emerged: enlargement. With it, the space for the EU's manoeuvring naturally extended. The estrangement paradigm, on the other hand, became more pronounced, as evidenced in relationship reversal, or downgrading of relations. Importantly, however, it is the increased 'political plasticity', post-2022, that enables multidirectional – instead of hitherto unidirectional – political moves both within and between three key paradigms of EU-Eastern neighbours relationality (3Es): enlargement, engagement and estrangement.

#### 4.1. 'Engagement': from democratization/Europeanization to democratic resilience

Initially, the EU largely kept a distance from the post-Soviet region, pursuing symbolic – rather than substantial – cooperation through the mid-1990s Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with all six post-2004 Eastern neighbours (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). In 1999, the EU's Common Strategy was developed towards Russia and Ukraine only, however.

Alongside the EU's accomplished and most encompassing 2004 Eastern enlargement, the establishment of democratic regimes in the neighbouring region through a series of 'colour revolutions' since the early 2000s facilitated a wholly new EU's 'discovery' of the former post-Soviet countries and considerably boosted the EU's geostrategic interest in, and engagement with, the region.

As the EU's normative power and ambitions within and beyond the region grew, its immediate 'neighbourhood' became a key foreign policy priority and got embraced in a special relationship framework since 2004, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Moreover, the Treaty of Lisbon introduced in 2007 a separate legal basis – and with it, a constitutional mandate – for the EU to 'engage' and develop 'a special relationship' with its

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<sup>64</sup> Youngs, R. (2024). *Geoliberal Europe and the Test of War*. Agenda Publishing.

neighbours (Art 8 TEU). Thanks to such self-endowed ‘neighbourhood competence’ under Article 8 TEU<sup>65</sup>, ‘engagement’ presents almost a ‘default’ logic of the EU’s interaction with its neighbourhood. Yet, in practice, the ways and the extent to which the EU institutions and member states chose to engage with a particular neighbour state vary and, what is more, are co-shaped with the third country in question.

Since then, the EU’s (geo)political engagement and financial commitment to the region have vastly advanced. Varied forms for ever-closer ties – from partnership to association to (external) differentiated integration – were forged with those Eastern neighbours that have been seeking rapprochement with the EU and that, by and large, progressed in building European-style democracies at home. The volume of the EU’s democratic assistance grew immensely in two decades since the launch of the ENP in 2004<sup>66</sup>. Political conditionality underpinned much of EU rhetoric and, less consistently, informed the extent of the Union’s political and financial engagement.

*Conditionality* has become a key mechanism of the EU’s influence on democratic development, including instances of stopping democratic backsliding in the Eastern neighbourhood but also further afield. Chiefly aiming to incentivize reforms and empower domestic actors, conditionality is known to have many facets and dimensions: from political and financial aid conditionality to market access conditionality; from positive to negative conditionality; from ex-ante to ex-post conditionality, etc.<sup>67</sup>.

Both the ENP and its regional dimension, the EaP, built on the EU’s vastly successful democratic conditionality and transformation agenda within its fifth enlargement to 10 new members (8 CEECs, as well as Cyprus and Malta) – and, as such, sought to employ conditionality as well<sup>68</sup>. The European Commission’s ENP Strategy Paper declared that the ‘pace of development of the European Union’s relationship with each partner country will depend on its degree of commitment to common values, as well as its will and capacity to implement agreed priorities’<sup>69</sup>. The Commission’s statement on the EaP rationale, too, confirmed the EU’s lasting commitment to the conditionality principle in that ‘how far [would the Union] go in relations with each country will continue to depend on the progress made by the partners in their reform and modernization efforts’<sup>70</sup>. In its 2008 Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on the EaP, the Commission, furthermore, stressed that ‘the upgrading of contractual relations towards Association Agreements’ is preconditioned on a ‘sufficient

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<sup>65</sup> Hillion, C. (2013). The Neighbourhood Competence under Article 8 TEU. *Notre Europe Policy Paper*, 69/2013, 19.02.2013, <https://institutdelors.eu/content/uploads/2025/04/euneighbourhoodart8teu-hillion-ne-jdi-feb13-3.pdf>

<sup>66</sup> In 2005-2022, the level of democracy assistance from the European Commission to the Eastern neighbourhood countries increased from \$159,137 in 2005 to \$13,167,083 in 2022, see: Freyburg, T., Dobrescu, M., & Vlasenko, A. (2024). Conceptual framework EU democracy funding Unpacking EU democracy assistance. What model of democracy does EU funding suit? *REDEMOS Working Paper D3.1* (March 2024), DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.13379017. Here p.13.

<sup>67</sup> Rabinovych, M., & Pintsch, A. (2024). Political conditionality as an EU foreign policy and crisis management tool. The case of EU wartime political conditionality vis-à-vis Ukraine. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(4), 491-512, here p.493-495.

<sup>68</sup> Kelley, J. (2006). New Wine in Old Wineskins: Promoting Political Reforms through the European Neighbourhood Policy. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44(1), 29-55; Sasse, G. (2008). The European Neighbourhood Policy: Conditionality Revisited for the EU’s Eastern Neighbours. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60(2), 295–316.

<sup>69</sup> European Commission (2004). “European Neighbourhood Policy Strategy Paper.” COM(2004), 373 Final, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52004DC0373>.

<sup>70</sup> European Commission (2009). “Eastern Partnership.” Press Release, MEMO/09/217, 05.05.2009, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-09-217\\_en.htm?locale=en](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-09-217_en.htm?locale=en).

level of progress in terms of democracy, the rule of law and human rights, and in particular evidence that the electoral legislative framework and practice are in compliance with international standards, and full cooperation with the Council of Europe, OSCE/ODIHR and UN human rights bodies'<sup>71</sup>. This neatly feeds into the current paper's relationality argument, positing that the deepening and upgrading of formal – contractual – relationship with the EU ought to be seen as indicative of Eastern neighbours' 'sufficient' enough progress in EU-style democratic transformation. The latter's limits and sporadically short-lived effects should, however, be approached critically and multi-causally, rather than blaming all on the lack of domestic resolve or capability alone: both the domestic cost of democratic reforms, the external cost of alignment with the EU in a growingly contested regional setting, as well as the 'low-cost' EU conditionality design under ENP/EaP itself are co-responsible for uneven outcomes in EN's democratization. As Lightfoot et al.<sup>72</sup> ponder, while 'mesmerized by enlargement', the EU's 'Eastern policy' in 2004-2014 lacked credible incentives and, most of all, the 'golden carrot' of EU accession prospect. Notably, even the 2014-concluded Association Agreements (AAs) with DCFTA components, while containing elaborate and 'enhanced' (common values and market access) EU acquis conditionality<sup>73</sup>, stopped short of explicitly offering Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine an EU membership perspective even in a remote future.

In practice, the EU's use of conditionality within its Eastern neighbourhood is not as stringent, straightforward and consistent as the approach would require it to be – in order to render due effectiveness. Its effectiveness is influenced by factors like domestic opposition, state capture, civil society weakness, and geopolitical competition. Negative and especially ex-ante conditionality has rarely been applied by the Union. Negative ex-post conditionality, entailing suspension of trade benefits for violations of 'essential elements' under EU AA and DCFTA agreements or reduction whether suspension of foreign assistance (including macro-financial assistance, MFA), seems to have been all too rarely deployed as well.

Moreover, both EU-internal contestations and policy inconsistencies, as well as external contestations of EU norms and rule transfer, have come to limit the EU's normative power in the Eastern neighbourhood<sup>74</sup> and its democratic conditionality. Many argue even that the EU's actions in its neighbourhood didn't support democracy, and that the unintended consequences of EU engagement strengthened illiberal regimes.

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<sup>71</sup> European Commission (2008). "Eastern Partnership." COM/2008/0823 Final, 03.12.2008, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0823:FIN:EN:PDF>. Here p.3,4.

<sup>72</sup> Lightfoot, S., Szent-Iványi, B., & Wolczuk, K. (2016). Mesmerized by Enlargement. *East European Politics & Societies*, 30(3), 664-684.

<sup>73</sup> Van der Loo, G., Van Elsuwege, P., & Petrov, R. (2014). The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement: assessment of an innovative legal instrument. *EUI Department of Law Research Paper*, 2014/09.

<sup>74</sup> Danieri, A. (2024). The Limits of the European Union's Normative Power Through the European Neighbourhood Policy in Armenia and Moldova. *Cambridge Journal of Political Affairs*, 9, 14-32.

#### 4.1.1. Democratic clauses in EU's PCA, ENP, EaP and AA/DCFTAs with Eastern neighbours

Between 1994 and 1999, the EU concluded *Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs)* with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, all containing identical human rights clauses emphasizing democracy and human rights. The EU attempted to ensure compliance, but the agreements lacked specific measures for violations. The low credibility of the PCAs was combined with limited economic and financial incentives, thus providing for negligent effects in democratization.

The 2004-inaugurated *European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)* and bilateral partnerships with countries in the EU's Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods have meant, first and foremost, to prevent new dividing lines, and promote prosperity, stability and security across the EU's peripheries, within the notoriously known 'ring of friends'. To this end, the ENP essentially aims to strengthen democracy and good governance in neighbouring countries. The uses of bilateral tools like ENP Action Plans (APs) allow for a focus on specific areas of democracy and good governance promotion, including, first and foremost, the rule of law, independent judiciary and anti-corruption measures.

In 2011, a wave of protests against authoritarian regimes in Northern Africa (the 'Arab Spring') prompted the EU to redefine its commitment to democracy promotion within its neighbourhoods. The European Commission developed a Joint Communication 'A new response to a changing neighbourhood', emphasizing the need for democratic consolidation and introducing the EU's new focus on '*deep democracy*', thus covering, in its external engagement ever since the *2011 ENP Review*: free and fair elections, freedom of association, expression, assembly, and a free press and media; the rule of law administered by an independent judiciary and the right to a fair trial; fighting corruption; security sector reform; and democratic control over armed and security forces.

Russian hybrid invasion of Ukraine in spring 2014, resulting inter alia in the swift annexation of Ukraine's Crimea, as well as the Syrian war-triggered refugee crisis, urged the EU to yet again reconsider its ENP rationale. The *2015 ENP Review* expressly linked democratization to the EU's security interests, contributing with the succeeding practice of balancing values and interests to the incremental '*securitization*' of the EU's Eastern neighbourhood – and the EU's democratization politics within it. This implied, in practice, an enhanced focus on state and societal 'resilience', and with it, the resulting normative compromises and prioritization of stability and security over democratic conditionality – all too well discernible in the EU's engagement with Western Balkan countries and within the Eastern neighbourhood (especially in relation to Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan). Some analysts even observe that the compromised democratic conditionality, inaugurated through the misapplication of the clause to MENA and WB 'stabilitocracies', was evident even before the 2015 shift, in particular in the EU's policy towards Ukraine during V. Yanukovich's presidency in 2010-2014<sup>75</sup>. In this regard, the EU's offering of an Association Agreement to Ukraine under Yanukovich's ever-autocratic rule and democratic regression in the country since 2010 can be seen as the EU's early move towards democratic hedging in the region.

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<sup>75</sup> Kubicek, P. (2017). Dancing with the devil: explaining the European Union's engagement with Ukraine under Viktor Yanukovich. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 25(2), 143-162.

In 2009, the *Eastern Partnership (EaP)* initiative was launched between the EU and its Eastern European neighbours, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Multilateral cooperation was facilitated by biannual EaP Summits, with the Prague Declaration (2009) emphasizing the partners' commitment to international law, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. The Warsaw Declaration (2011) reaffirmed the Eastern Partnership's foundation on these values and principles. The Vilnius Declaration (2013) highlighted the ongoing challenges to democracy and reiterated the commitment to addressing them. The Riga Declaration (2015) emphasized the importance of strengthening democracy and enabling market economies to foster cooperation, trade, growth, and competitiveness, highlighting the significance of the 'new generation' Association Agreements signed between the EU and Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova in achieving sustainable democracy and deep modernization. Reflecting the EU's 'resilience turn', the Brussels EaP summit Declaration declared joint commitments towards building more resilient economy, governance, connectivity and society within EaP countries, with a particular focus on greater support to civil society. The most recent 2021 Brussels EaP summit, held without Belarus (as it suspended its participation in EaP in 2020), reaffirmed the partners' joint commitment to fundamental 'shared values', as well as underscored both shared ownership, mutual accountability, inclusivity and long-sought differentiation<sup>76</sup>.

Whereas scepticism abounds around the EaP's rather mixed success in promoting democracy and economic integration among its six partner countries, the record of the EaP's deliverables in 2009-2020 within the EU-associated Eastern neighbours (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) looks more promising<sup>77</sup>.

Moreover, an increasing linkage and convergence with the EU of the associated EaP3 is quite distinctive when contrasted with traditionally 'disengaging' Azerbaijan and Belarus, as the EaP Index 2011-2025 data show<sup>78</sup>. The sample of the policy convergence and democratic development dynamics in six EaP countries from 2013 to 2023, in particular, demonstrates that every country experienced at least some progress in their linkage and approximation with the EU over the decade; at the same time, progress in democratic development had only been observed in the associated EaP3 and CEPA-partner Armenia, with Azerbaijan and Belarus remaining as the two conventional 'suspects' for their authoritarian deepening; notably, Moldova's gain in convergence with the EU had been tiniest, whilst Armenia's – largest (see Figure 7 below):

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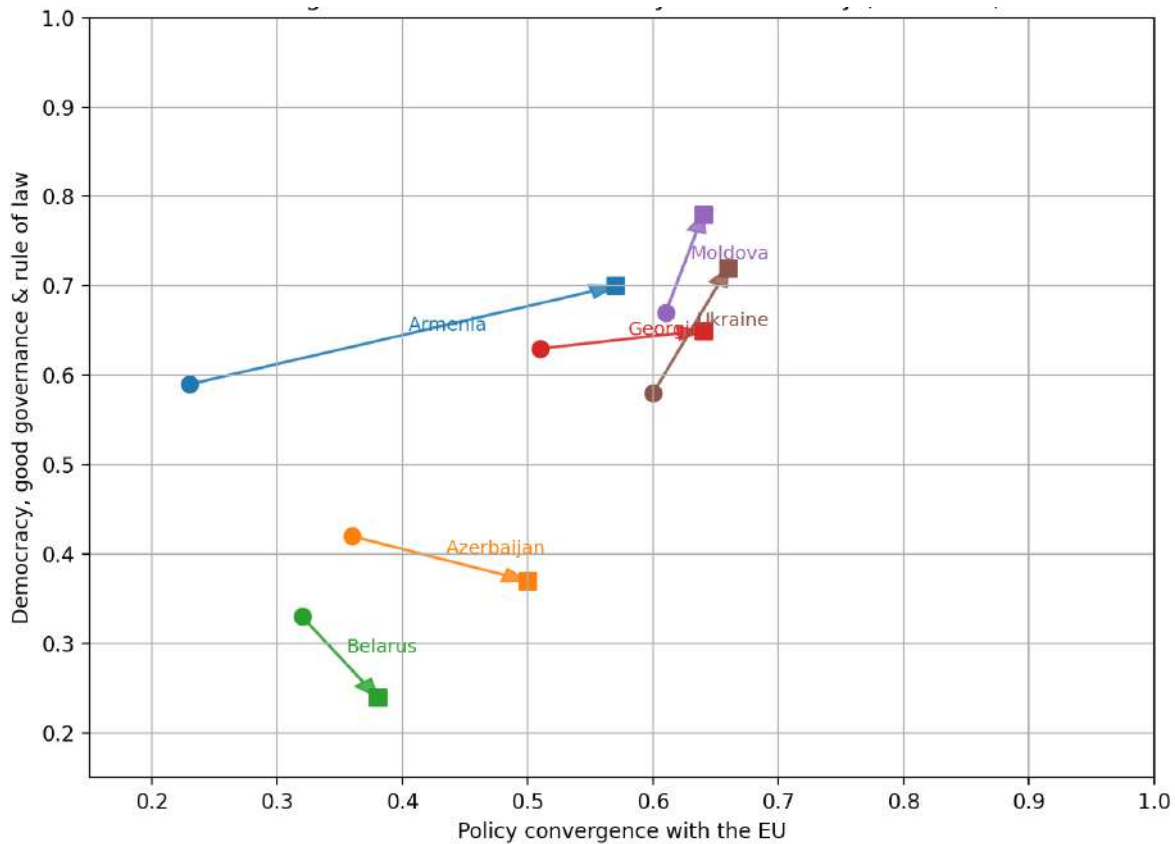
<sup>76</sup> Tyushka, A. (2022). Annex 1: Content Analysing the Joint Declarations of the Eastern Partnership Summits in 2009-2017. In A. Tyushka and T. Schumacher (eds.), *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbourhood: Whither 'Eastern Partnership'?* (pp.281-289). London and New York: Routledge. Here pp.281-289.

<sup>77</sup> Tyushka, A., & Schumacher, T. (2022). Looking Backward: Deliverables and Drawbacks of the Eastern Partnership during 2009-2020. In A. Tyushka and T. Schumacher (eds.), *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbourhood: Whither 'Eastern Partnership'?* (pp.241-264). London and New York: Routledge. Here p.241-264.

<sup>78</sup> EaP CSF (2025). Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum – *Eastern Partnership Index* (periodic editions from 2011 to 2025), <https://eap-csf.eu/what-we-do/eap-index/>



**Figure 7** The dynamics of change from 2013 to 2023 in EaP countries' policy convergence with the EU and their state of democracy, good governance and the rule of law



Source: own elaboration based on EaP Index 2013 and 2023 data, <https://eap-csf.eu/what-we-do/eap-index/>

The EU negotiated and signed highly ambitious *Association Agreements (AAs) with Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) components* with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in 2014 to strengthen political association and economic integration. These encompassing 'new generation' AAs cover extensive cooperation areas, including political dialogue, legal assistance, and financial assistance, as well as they foresee vast levels of legislative and regulatory approximation nearly commensurate with EEA frameworks or the EU membership as such<sup>79</sup>. For instance, the scope of the EU acquis that Ukraine committed to transpose under its AA/DCFTA amounts to some staggering 95%<sup>80</sup>. Notably, these AAs are based on 'shared values' and principles such as democracy, human rights, and a free market economy.

Under Association Agreements, conditionality forms and mechanisms got considerably widened and enhanced. Not only did the DCFTA-related market access conditionality precondition progress in good governance,

<sup>79</sup> Tyushka, A. (2017). Building the neighbours: the EU's new Association Agreements and structural power in the Eastern neighbourhood. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 25(1), 45-61.

<sup>80</sup> Duleba, A. (2022). Differentiated European integration of Ukraine in comparative perspective. *East European politics and societies*, 36(02), 359-377, here p.365.

competition, anti-corruption and other market economy areas, but also AA-underwriting democracy and human rights conditionality, including protection of minorities, freedom of speech and political plurality, rose to an 'essential element' clause, non-observation of which could theoretically result in suspension of certain AA/DCFTA benefits or the agreement as a whole.

In other words, *conditionality* now became for *Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine* truly multifaceted and 'foundational' a principle of relations with the EU. Empirical studies into the appliance and effects of EU conditionality towards associated Eastern neighbours show mixed results at best.

In Ukraine, the 'two faces' of EU conditionality, as observed until 2016, showed limited EU leverage within the intergovernmental bargaining approach ('external incentives model', EIM) but a much more promising outcome achieved through societal mobilization and differential empowerment of local agency<sup>81</sup>.

The role of domestic actors was found to be of utmost significance in the success or failure of EU democratic conditionality. Looking into the dynamics of legislative approximation in Moldova from ENP to AA with the EU, Baltag and Burmester<sup>82</sup> infer that, alongside civil society, domestic political and business elites are key in both accepting EU normative projection (internalization) and applying EU-style democratic standards (implementation).

There seems to be a discrepancy as well between political rhetoric and self-praising commitment to 'shared norms' with the EU and the actual implementation of the EU's values and market acquis. Issues with half-hearted implementation of the undertaken legislative approximation commitments under AAs were noticed across the associated EaP3 countries. In Georgia, for instance, well before the recent democratic backsliding, non-compliance with its AA obligations – due to insufficient administrative capacity, the politicized nature of public administration, as well as protracted judicial reform – was recurrently spotted<sup>83</sup>.

Yet, and in spite of both domestic political and administrative limitations as well as external pressures, throughout the 2010s, revolutionary and EU association-driven transformations brought about democratic consolidation in both Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

Moreover, and paradoxically, Russian informal 'conditionality', coupled with growingly assertive and coercive anti-Western push, seems to have produced unintended and (for Russia) counter-productive effects in 2000s-2010s, as Georgia, Ukraine – but also Moldova – grew increasingly determined to pursue their European integration and democratization course as an escape from Russian hegemony<sup>84</sup>. In this paradoxical way, Russian coercive posturing in the region acted as a facilitator, rather than a spoiler, of democratization.

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<sup>81</sup> Burlyuk, O., & Shapovalova, N. (2017). "Veni, vidi, ... vici?" EU performance and two faces of conditionality towards Ukraine. *East European Politics*, 33(1), 36-55, here p.49.

<sup>82</sup> Baltag, D., & Burmester, I. (2022). Quo vadis, Moldova? The role of social and political elites in the norm internalization process. *Democratization*, 29(3), 487-506.

<sup>83</sup> Anderlini, M.V. (2024). Implementation Is the Hardest Word: Explaining Georgia's (Non)-Compliance with European Union Acquis. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 71(5), 446-460.

<sup>84</sup> Delcour, L., & Wolczuk, K. (2015). Spoiler or facilitator of democratization? Russia's role in Georgia and Ukraine. *Democratization*, 22(3), 459-478.

The dynamics took on a different course a decade later, as both internal and external contestations of the EU's normative appeal (and the Western liberal democratic model overall) grew – and the 'alternative' models of illiberal governance started spreading in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood and the EU proper, too.

Whether the persisting legacy of post-Soviet electoral laws<sup>85</sup> or the novel 'know how' legislative tools to suppress democratic plurality – such as illiberal 'foreign agent laws' – that have spread from Russia to Central Asian post-Soviet states, Belarus, Azerbaijan or, more recently, Georgia<sup>86</sup> – all manifest strongly competing power of autocratic governance in times of regional and global geopolitical uncertainty.

#### 4.1.2. *EU's democratic conditionality meeting democratic assistance dynamics*

The European Union is the major donor of foreign aid, particularly in its Eastern neighbourhood, with a focus on democracy promotion. The EU's democracy assistance in the Eastern neighbourhood promotes a common understanding of liberal democracy, with significant investment in peacebuilding and a growing focus on participatory assistance and thus local agency support.

While remaining a debatable topic, the effects of *EU democracy assistance* can be reasonably said to improve democracy, albeit they may be both reversible and not necessarily efficient as such. In the first-ever broad empirical study of the impact of EU-led democracy assistance projects across 126 recipient countries in 2002–2018, Gafuri<sup>87</sup> arrives at a convincing conclusion that the EU's democracy support 'positively impacts democracy levels of recipient countries', not least because of the EU's image as 'one of the largest and most credible promoters of democracy worldwide' and its 'political conditionality and monitoring mechanisms in the beneficiary countries'.

Other pundits, such as Clarke<sup>88</sup>, observe, however, that inconsistent foreign aid, seen as the recurrent flaw of the EU's democracy support as well, dooms 'new democracies' (what all of the EU's Eastern neighbours are), particularly those that come to power through revolution (again, a pertinent observation in the EU's EN context).

As noted above, throughout the 1990s, the EU's engagement with the EN region remained largely symbolic, and so did its financial commitment to the region's democratization cause. Albeit already in 1994 it launched the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and bilaterally redeployed, in 1992, the (originally launched in 1991 for the USSR) programmes of Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS), the EU's direct financial support, for instance, to the 'Western New Independent

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<sup>85</sup> Bader, M. (2014). Democracy promotion and authoritarian diffusion: The foreign origins of post-Soviet election laws. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 66(8), 1350–1370.

<sup>86</sup> Waller, J. G. (2023). Mimicking the mad printer: Legislating illiberalism in post-soviet Eurasia. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 70(3), 225–240.

<sup>87</sup> Gafuri, A. (2022). Can democracy aid improve democracy? The European Union's democracy assistance 2002–2018. *Democratization*, 29(5), 777–797, here p.777.

<sup>88</sup> Clarke, K. (2023). Ambivalent allies: How inconsistent foreign support dooms new democracies. *Journal of Peace Research*, 60(1), 157–171.

States' (Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus) was marginal. The disbursed EUR 2723 million for Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus from 1991 to 2003 stood all too low, especially when compared to the EU's investment of EUR 5710 million for then-EU-accessing Poland during the same period, and was not underpinned by any conditionality<sup>89</sup>.

Through its 2011 ENP Review, the EU introduced the '*more for more*' principle within its democratic conditionality approach in relations with the neighbours east and south. This translates into both the levels of political relationality as well as financial aid that the EU commits itself to in relation to specific regions and neighbours per se.

Whereas for the past twenty years, in the 2004-2024 period, the *EU's and EU member states' assistance to the EN* considerably expanded, it has not seen an even and steadfast growth trajectory.

Under the 2007-2014 European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), the EU disbursed for the Eastern neighbours ca. EUR 6.58 billion of the entire budget of EUR 11.2 billion; the 2014-2020 European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) allocated some ca. EUR 3.68 billion of the overall budgeted EUR 15.43 billion, however; within a more complex cross-issue and cross-region budgetary scheme of the current 2021-2027 Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe), out of the overall allocated EUR 79.5 billion, ca. EUR 19.32 billions are earmarked for both Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods, with further funds available within thematic programmes (Human Rights and Democracy; Civil Society Organizations; Peace, Stability and Conflict Prevention; and Global Challenges) and other crisis and 'cushion' funds<sup>90</sup>.

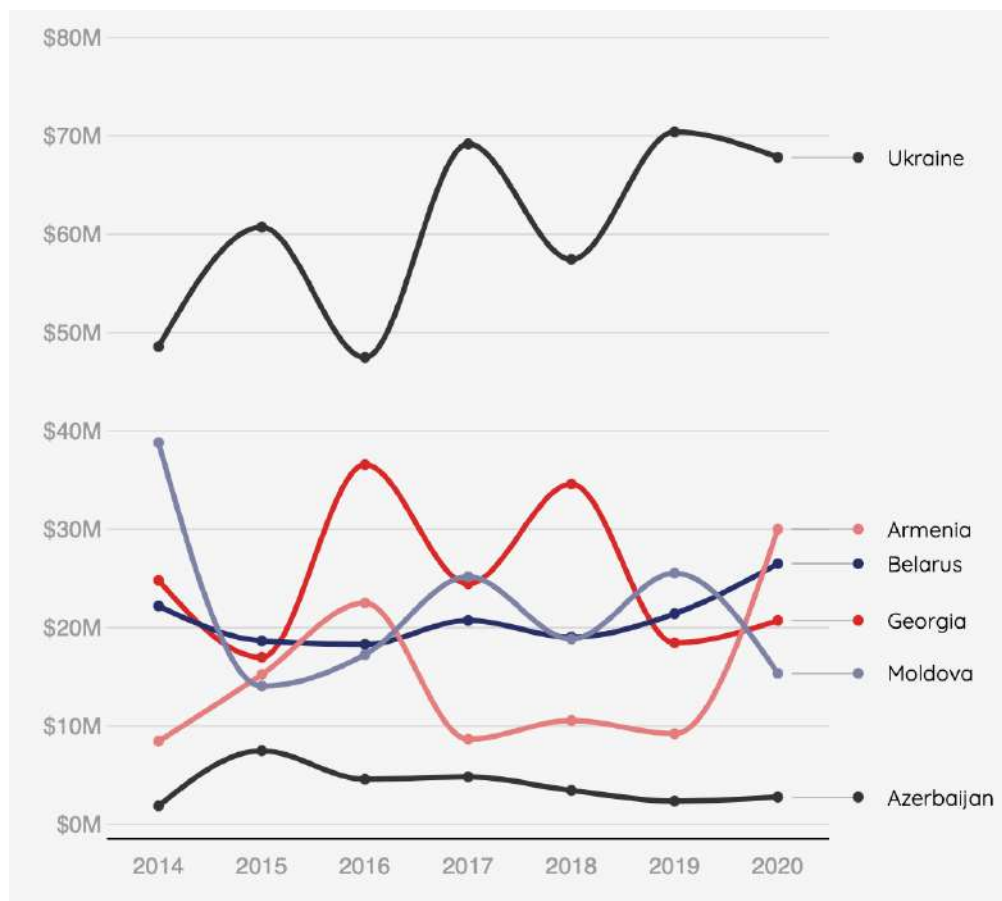
The volumes and dynamics of country-specific funding by the EU institutions across the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, thereby, considerably varies, with Ukraine – given the country's size, proximity as well as geostrategic significance – being the major recipient, whilst Azerbaijan steadily and decliningly receiving the lowest funding in the 2014-2020 period, and so unlike Belarus that, in spite of its authoritarian regression, kept receiving allocations commensurate to Moldova post-2014 cuts for the massive banking fraud (see Figure 8 below). As is the case with Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia's funding has been truly fluctuating, with the sinusoidal trend perhaps best proving the EU's '*more for more*' and '*less for less*' approach in-use, whilst declining flatlines in the EU's democratic assistance to Azerbaijan and Belarus owe it to the ever-growing autocratic domestic developments in both countries.

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<sup>89</sup> Potentially, however, limited conditionality could be applied, such as freezing of disbursements – as done in relation to Russia during the war in Chechnya.

<sup>90</sup> Tyushka & Schumacher (2022), *supra* n. 77, at p.248; European Commission (n.d.), Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI – Global Europe), [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-technical-assistance/neighbourhood-development-and-international-cooperation-instrument-global-europe-ndici-global-europe\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-technical-assistance/neighbourhood-development-and-international-cooperation-instrument-global-europe-ndici-global-europe_en).

**Figure 8** EU democracy support to EaP countries: Funding by EU institutions



Source: data and visualization by European Democracy Hub<sup>91</sup>

Thereby, in the period of 2014-2020, EU institutional democracy assistance was chiefly directed to five key areas (in salience-descending order: justice and the rule of law; civil society support; civil and political rights; electoral assistance; and political inclusion), and comprised – by the type of assistance – project-type interventions (79%), other technical assistance (9%), sector budget support (7%), contributions to specific-purpose programmes and funds managed by implementing partners (4%), as well as varied other assistance (1%)<sup>92</sup>.

At a country level, the key support areas, for instance, in Ukraine included civil society support, media support, civil and political rights protection initiatives, justice and the rule of law actions, as well as, to a lesser extent, transparency and anti-corruption measures, electoral assistance and overall political transformation initiatives<sup>93</sup>.

<sup>91</sup> European Democracy Hub (n.d.) – OVERALL AID, <https://democracy-aid.europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/geo>

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> European Democracy Hub (n.d.) – UKRAINE AID, <https://democracy-aid.europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/recipients/85>

Longitudinal and cross-country empirical studies corroborate the external incentives model (EIM) and reaffirm that a positive cost-benefit balance of domestic transformation tends to encourage democratic consolidation in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood (Buscaneanu and Li 2024: 770-775)<sup>94</sup>. This partially dispels dismissive takes on as if 'default' ineffectiveness of EU democracy assistance as manifested through multiply observed democratic stasis, backsliding or even regression to authoritarianism across the region. In the cases of Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova observed throughout 1991-2014, Buscaneanu and Li also reaffirm<sup>95</sup> that, in the period following the launch of the EaP (2009-2014), the EU got more consistent in its democracy assistance, applying the differentiation ('more for more') principle and thus doubling the size of rewards for the EaP3.

The EU's 2024 mid-term funding review and reallocation of democratic assistance 'in line with developments in partner countries' (including reform progress), too, demonstrate the 'more for more' principle in use: having nearly maintained the financing levels for Belarus (EUR 28.5 million in 2022 vs EUR 33 million in 2024) and Azerbaijan (EUR 15 million in 2022 vs EUR 20 million in 2024), the European Commission allocated 50% more funding to Armenia (EUR 45 million in 2022 vs EUR 67.5 million in 2024), Moldova (EUR 127 million in 2022 vs EUR 150 million in 2023 and EUR 140 million in 2024) and Ukraine (ca. EUR 10 billion in 2021-2024<sup>96</sup>; from February 2024, a separate funding track under the EUR 50 billion-strong Ukraine Facility scheme with the operating period of 2024-2027<sup>97</sup>), having considerably withheld the earlier-earmarked funding for Georgia (EUR 12 million cuts in 2022, EUR 72 million withheld in 2023 and EUR 37.3 million – in 2024) in reaction to its democratic backsliding since 2022<sup>98</sup>.

Notably, the EU's other – off-budget and emergency – funding schemes, such as the 2021-activated EUR 202 million-strong 'EaP Solidarity Package' in response to the Covid-19 pandemic or the EaP Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) (EUR 2.3 billion earmarked under the EU budget for 2021-2026, with potential to further mobilize up to EUR 17 billion in public and private investments), seem to follow the conditionality principle, while the EU's February 2024 'Ukraine Facility' (EUR 50 billion over the period of 2024-2027) or December 2024-agreed Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova (EUR 1.9 billion for the period of 2025-2027) do embrace more the logic of geostrategic hedging and democracy protection in light of Russian war and authoritarian expansion in the region.

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<sup>94</sup> Buscaneanu, S., & Li, A. X. (2024). The external incentives model embedded: evidence from the European Union's eastern neighbourhood. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 62(3), 760-783, here p.770-775.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p.775.

<sup>96</sup> Moreover, since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 and until late 2024, the EU and EU member states made available – both within and beyond the NDICI-GE instruments – almost EUR 122 billion in financial, humanitarian and military assistance to Ukraine.

<sup>97</sup> European Commission – DG ENEST (n.d.). Ukraine Facility, *European Commission – DG Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST)*, [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-technical-assistance/ukraine-facility\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-technical-assistance/ukraine-facility_en)

<sup>98</sup> European Commission (2024). 2024 Financial Allocations: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia & Moldova, <https://eu4georgia.eu/financial-assistance-lost-as-a-result-of-democratic-backsliding/>

#### 4.1.3. *The multiverses of EU resilience-building: democratic resilience and state-and-societal resilience against hybrid threats*

In EU foreign and in particular neighbourhood policy, the ‘resilience turn’<sup>99</sup> arrived in the 2010s, albeit sporadically resurfacing (as a keyword rather than as a policy paradigm) on the EU’s agenda since the 2000s already. With the adoption of the EU Global Strategy in 2016, resilience rose to a strategic approach in EU external action<sup>100</sup>. The post-2015 Eastern Partnership framework, and in particular the EaP’s ‘20 Deliverables for 2020’, too, tightly embraced resilience as a cross-cutting paradigm of EU engagement with the Eastern neighbours<sup>101</sup>. Furthermore, in their Joint Communication issued on 18 March 2020, the European Commission and the HR/VP defined the broad parameters of the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020, anchoring thereby the key goal of the post-2020 EaP – namely, to strengthen the resilience of Eastern Partnership countries, their institutions, economies, and societies. The Covid19 coronavirus pandemic that struck the EU and its neighbourhoods alike only further reaffirmed the EaP’s emphasis on ‘recovery, reform and resilience’ ever since<sup>102</sup>.

The EU’s post-2010s resilience-building efforts, thus, revolve around both boosting ‘*societal resilience*’ (that is, social coherence and trust, more efficient and legitimate governance institutions, greater equality and inclusion, awareness, etc.), as well as enhancing ‘*state-institutional resilience*’ (that is, decision- and policymaking capacity of state institutions, popular trust in public institutions, territorial security, infrastructure and/or energy security, health and human security, security of strategic communications, and state capacity to anticipate, cope with and adapt to external and internal challenges, including the ability to recover therefrom). The EU approach to enhancing state and societal resilience within its neighbourhood aims to avoid externally led and top-down enforcement of policies, involving instead a multi-level process to support state institutions, strengthen civil society, and nurture community resilience.

From the 2020s onwards, and especially after the Russian all-out military assault on Ukraine in early 2022, the EU’s internal *and* external resilience-building agenda expanded to include ‘democratic resilience’ as well. *Democratic resilience* can be defined in many ways as the ability to remain crisis-proof, resistant to the autocratization challenge or as the ability to recover from crises of democracy. Within democracy studies, resilience has been a recent addition as well – and so alongside the shift of the focus from democratization to the challenges of autocratization. As Holloway and Manwaring highlight<sup>103</sup>, its application in democracy studies

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<sup>99</sup> Juncos, A.E. (2017). Resilience as the new EU foreign policy paradigm: a pragmatist turn? *European security*, 26(1), 1-18; Tocci, N. (2020). Resilience and the Role of the European Union in the World. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41(2), 176-194.

<sup>100</sup> European External Action Service (2016). Shared Vision, Common Action: Stronger Europe. *A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels, pp. 13-16; European Commission (2017). A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU’s external action, Brussels, 07.06.2017, JOIN 2017/21 final.

<sup>101</sup> Kaunert, C., Bosse, G., & Vieira, A. (eds.). (2024). *EU, Security and The Eastern Partnership: Resilient States versus Resilient Societies*. London and New York: Routledge; Rouet, G., & Pascariu, G.C. (eds.). (2019). *Resilience and the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood Countries: From Theoretical Concepts to a Normative Agenda*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>102</sup> “The EaP: Recovery - Reform – Resilience”, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/the-eastern-partnership-recovery-reform-resilience/>

<sup>103</sup> Holloway, J., & Manwaring, R. (2023). How well does ‘resilience’ apply to democracy? A systematic review. *Contemporary Politics*, 29(1), 68-92.



is not without challenges. Chiefly, the notion of ‘democratic resilience’ is applied to understand how democracies respond to threats, with an emphasis on the ability of democratic systems to withstand autocratization challenges and maintain their core principles. Thereby, the following key functions and features of resilience are implied: stability and maintenance, recovery, adaptation, innovation and transformation<sup>104</sup>. As key sources of democratic resilience usually are named: political culture, norms and attitudes toward democracy; rule of law and independent judiciary; constitutional design and limited government; public institutions; party system, party competition and opposition strategies; civil society; political parties and political leaders; political and social trust; political, social and/or economic inclusion; free press; accountability, transparency and integrity of political processes; free, fair elections and electoral integrity; public political participation; civic education or media literacy; public awareness of threats to democracy; neighbouring democratic regimes; democratic ‘stock’ and other sources<sup>105</sup>.

In its first conceptualization, democratic resilience is said to exist when ‘an attachment to democratic ideals persists and such ideals continue to be canvassed in some quarters, in spite of hostility from the officially prescribed values and norms and apparent indifference from many elements in society’<sup>106</sup>. In contrast to this ‘attachment’ account of democratic resilience, Boese et al.<sup>107</sup> advance the ‘persistence’ account viewing resilience as ‘the persistence of democratic institutions and practices’ in the face of crises and challenges, which they conceive of as a two-stage process involving ‘onset resilience’ (ie. preventing, or avoiding, autocratization), and ‘breakdown resilience’ (ie. averting democratic breakdown). For Lührmann<sup>108</sup>, disrupting the so-called ‘autocratization sequence’ – a sequence of events with anti-pluralist parties exploiting citizen discontent to gain power – by addressing citizen discontent through better democratic party supply and civic education, countering anti-pluralist narratives through critical engagement, and strengthening accountability mechanisms and opposition actors is a way to enhance democratic resilience. Democratic resilience against autocratization, thus, requires a multi-faceted approach, focusing on preventing discontent with democratic institutions, countering anti-pluralist actors, and strengthening accountability mechanisms<sup>109</sup>.

European Commission President U. von der Leyen made the protection of democracy an absolute priority of her second term. In May 2024, at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit, she pledged to set up a ‘European Democracy Shield’ to protect the EU from malign foreign interference by enhancing the Union’s capabilities in combating disinformation and malign online manipulation<sup>110</sup>. Equally, democratic resilience rose to a salient issue in EU

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>106</sup> Burnell, P., & Calvert, P. (1999). The resilience of democracy: An introduction. *Democratization*, 6(1), 1-32, here p. 4.

<sup>107</sup> Boese, V.A., A.B. Edgell, S. Hellmeier, S.F. Maerz & S.I. Lindberg. (2021). How democracies prevail: democratic resilience as a two-stage process. *Democratization*, 28(5), 885-907, here p.887.

<sup>108</sup> Lührmann, A. (2021). Disrupting the autocratization sequence: towards democratic resilience. *Democratization*, 28(5), 1017-1039.

<sup>109</sup> Laebens, M.G., & Lührmann, A. (2021). What halts democratic erosion? The changing role of accountability. *Democratization*, 28(5), 908-928.

<sup>110</sup> Jones, M.G. (2024). Von der Leyen pitches plan to shield EU from foreign interference if re-elected. *Euronews*, 14.05.2024, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/05/14/von-der-leyen-pitches-plan-to-shield-eu-from-foreign-interference-if-re-elected>

Council deliberations. On 24 May 2024, Council conclusions underlined that democratic resilience and safeguarding electoral processes from all forms of foreign interference remain a central focus of the Council's agenda<sup>111</sup>.

In policy terms, the EU's focus on democratic resilience is intertwined with that on resilience against hybrid threats. Alongside the rule of law conditionality mechanisms, the Digital Services Act, the European Media Freedom Act, the strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, as well as the Hybrid Toolbox, EU INTCEM Hybrid Fusion Cell (HFC), the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Toolbox, the Hybrid Rapid Response Teams (HRRT) are only a few mechanisms worthy of mentioning here. Most recently, in mid-November 2025, the European Commission finally launched the 'European Democracy Shield', a host of measures to 'empower, protect, and promote strong and resilience democracies across the EU', and put forward an EU Strategy for Civil Society envisioning stronger engagement, protection and support to CSOs (i.a., through up to EUR 9 billion additional funding earmarked under the 'Agora EU' Programme)<sup>112</sup>. With an aim of countering hybrid threats, including foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and disinformation, the European Democracy Shield envisaged the creation of a new European Centre for Democratic Resilience.

Surprising – cross-cut – synergy effects of the EU's twin-focus on democratic and security resilience were, for instance, found in the outcomes of the EUAM Mission in Ukraine, focusing since 2015 on civilian security sector reform (SSR), that brought democratic governance to a sector 'least likely to reform' due to both heavy Soviet legacy across law enforcement institutions as well as domestic structural resistance to change<sup>113</sup>.

At the same time, the critics observe that the EU pursues a minimalistic resilience-building agenda in its EN, as has been the case of Moldova in 2014-2020, when the EU's key focus was almost exclusively laid on anti-corruption measures, de-politicization of Moldovan judiciary, and the responsabilization of local elites for progress in democratic reforms<sup>114</sup>.

Add to this that the EU's and the Eastern neighbours' own conceptions of resilience seem to differ – as Ukraine's seem to have<sup>115</sup>. Because of Russia's decade-lasting aggression, Ukraine's preoccupation has chiefly been with boosting its resilience against Russian hybrid threats and conventional attacks, rather than laying its centre of gravity on resilience of democratic institutions and governance at large. Ukraine's and Ukrainians' remarkable

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<sup>111</sup> Council of the EU (2024). Democratic resilience: Council approves conclusions on safeguarding electoral processes from foreign interference. *Consilium*, Brussels, 21.05. 2024, 10119/24, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/05/21/democratic-resilience-council-approves-conclusions-on-safeguarding-electoral-processes-from-foreign-interference/>

<sup>112</sup> European Commission (2025). European Democracy Shield and EU Strategy for Civil Society pave the way for stronger and more resilient democracies. *Press Release*, Brussels, 12.11.2025, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_25\\_2660](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_2660)

<sup>113</sup> Noutcheva, G., & Zarembo, K. (2025). Normative power at its unlikely: EU democratic norms and security service reform in Ukraine. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 60(3), 504-523.

<sup>114</sup> Corman, M.-R., & Schumacher, T. (2023). Going back and forth: European Union resilience-building in Moldova between 2014 and 2020. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 31(4), 1106-1121.

<sup>115</sup> Kočí, K., Gladys, M., & Krayevska, O. (2023). Do the EU and Ukraine speak the same language? The various notions of resilience before the military intervention. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 31(4), 1274-1293, here p. 1279-1280

resilience in the face of Russian full-scale invasion since February 2022 vindicated Kyiv's shift of balance to 'security first'<sup>116</sup>.

Mounting and mutating – especially since the 2016 rise of post-truth politics – *disinformation* threats cut across the EU's resilience-building agendas at home and within the Eastern neighbourhood. The EU's response to disinformation at home reflects a tension between geopolitical and regulatory logics<sup>117</sup> as well as both considerations pro and contra 'militant democracy'<sup>118</sup>. The geopolitical logic views disinformation as a weapon used by foreign actors, while the regulatory logic sees it as a byproduct of digitalization. Within the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, there is a clear understanding of disinformation as a Russian geopolitical weapon that targets both democratic and geopolitical trajectories as well as security proper of the EU neighbours. Hence, the EU's investment in enhancing daily and strategic communications with EN and new bodies, such as the EU East StratCom Task Force (ESTF), launched in April 2015 and hosted within the EEAS<sup>119</sup>, and measures, such as ESTF's Kremlin disinformation-busting flagship project 'EUvsDisinfo'<sup>120</sup> or a myriad of EU-sponsored campaigns for media literacy, political awareness, fact-checking, fact-based journalism and other activities meant to help citizens across the EU and its Eastern neighbourhood develop resistance to digital information and media manipulation.

In this sense, the EU's counter-disinformation measures at home and abroad entail both democratic defence and geostrategic deterrence against hostile external (chiefly, Russian) influence.

Last but not least, both the EU and, particularly, its Eastern neighbours face mounting challenges of *foreign interference in electoral processes*, particularly from Russia and China. Unexceptionally, such interference threatens democratic stability and national security across the region<sup>121</sup>. For instance, the Authoritarian Interference Tracker records a high – and increasing – number of foreign interferences in democratic processes within the EU and its Eastern neighbourhood, including 13 incidents in Moldova, 14 in Georgia, and 48 in Ukraine – all between 2008 and 2024 only<sup>122</sup>. The 2024 election cycles in Moldova and Georgia were particularly targeted by vastly Russia-originating disinformation and manipulation campaigns, and so was Ukraine's protraction of the 2024 due presidential elections in light of the ongoing war and martial law in force. Hard-won in the October 2024 presidential elections and the simultaneous EU accession referendum, Moldova's pro-European course had yet again to stand the test of resolve and resilience against Russia-sponsored hybrid campaigns during the

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<sup>116</sup> Kudelia, S. (2022). The Ukrainian State under Russian Aggression: Resilience and Resistance. *Current History*, October 2022, pp. 252-253; Hedenskog, J. (2023). Explaining Ukrainian Resilience. *SCEEUS Report*, 5/2023, 05 April 2023.

<sup>117</sup> Casero-Ripollés, A., Tuñón, J., & Bouza-García, L. (2023). The European approach to online disinformation: Geopolitical and regulatory dissonance. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10(1), 1-10; Cupać, J., & Sienknecht, M. (2024). Regulate against the machine: how the EU mitigates AI harm to democracy. *Democratization*, DOI:10.1080/13510347.2024.2353706.

<sup>118</sup> Vériter, S. (2021). European Democracy and Counter-Disinformation: Toward a New Paradigm? *Carnegie Europe*, 14.12.2021; Juhász, K. (2024). European Union defensive democracy's responses to disinformation. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 32(4), 1075-1094.

<sup>119</sup> EEAS (n.d.). EEAS Strategic Communication Task Forces, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eeas-strategic-communication-task-forces\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eeas-strategic-communication-task-forces_en)

<sup>120</sup> EEAS (n.d.) EUvsDisinfo by East Stratcom Task Force, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/about/>

<sup>121</sup> Chechelashvili, M., Berikashvili, L., & Malania, E. (2023). Foreign interference in electoral processes as a factor of international politics: Mechanisms and counteraction. *Foreign Affairs*, 33(6), 52-62, here p.55.

<sup>122</sup> GMF (n.d.). Authoritarian Interference Tracker, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/toolbox/authoritarian-interference-tracker/>

country's autumn 2025 parliamentary elections<sup>123</sup>. Under immense diplomatic pressure and undiplomatic – hybrid – attacks, including disinformation and clandestine measures, from Russia, Moldova's September 2025 parliamentary elections successfully stood this test to the country's democracy, European choice – and the resilience of both<sup>124</sup>. Both the media, civil society and the government acted with a resolve to identify, expose, prevent or counter Russia-sponsored illicit activity (from political corruption and vote-buying to disinformation and narrative offensives, as well as the proliferation of fake pro-EU and pro-Romania parties and other social and political formations alongside pro-Russian political forces), with awareness-raising campaigns amongst population flanking the effort. In the wake of the autumn 2025 elections marked by such Russian and Russia-sponsored malign interference, the newly formed Moldovan Parliament refused to form the usual parliamentary groups of 'friendship' with Russia and Belarus, thus marking a radical turn away from the 34-year 'tradition'. In addition, Moldova denounced an agreement with Russia on cultural centres, eyeing the closure of the 'Russkii dom' in Chisinau. Instead, on 7 November 2025, the European Parliament opened its first Bureau in Moldova, thus inaugurating its permanent presence and adding to yet another layer of relationality between Moldova and the EU.

Beyond electoral interference, Russian hybrid attacks in the region comprise economic pressure and open energy blackmail, cyberattacks, political subversion and sabotage campaigns to name but a few, with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia being particularly targeted<sup>125</sup>. Post-2020 EU-leaning Armenia, too, is subjected to Russian and Russia-sponsored clandestine activities, as (sic!) two prevented coups since September 2024 clearly demonstrate.

In the anticipation of Russian hybrid influencing, the EU concluded with Moldova on 21 May 2024 the first-ever (in the neighbourhood space) Security and Defence Partnership, having earlier (in April 2023) launched as well the 'EUPM Moldova' CSDP mission, which aims to boost Chisinau's capabilities and resilience in a wide range of security and defence areas, including crisis management, hybrid and cyber threats, counterterrorism, border management<sup>126</sup>. To an extent, such a scope of the EUPM Moldova's mandate is seen as the most pertinent part of the EU's commitment to democracy protection post-2022.

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<sup>123</sup> Jochecová, K. (2024). Moldovan spy chief: Russia will try to interfere in 2025 parliamentary election, too. *POLITICO*, 13.12.2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/moldovan-spy-chief-russia-will-try-interfere-parliamentary-elections-next-year-alexandru-musteata/>

<sup>124</sup> Wilson, A. (2025). The bear behind the ballot: Moldova's election in the shadow of war. *ECFR Policy Brief*, June 2025; Litra, L., and Valodskaitė, G. (2025). Love thy neighbour: Moldova's election is a stress test for European resilience. *ECFR Commentary*, 26.09.2025; Groza, Yu. (2025). Moldova's New Beginning: Lessons from Russia's Hybrid Interference and a Test for Democratic Resilience. *REUNIR Blog*, 03.11.2025, <https://reunir-horizon.eu/moldovas-new-beginning-lessons-from-russias-hybrid-interference-and-a-test-for-democratic-resilience/>

<sup>125</sup> Ratsyborinska, V. (2022). EU-NATO and the Eastern Partnership Countries Against Hybrid Threats (2016-2021). *National Security and the Future*, 23(2), 89-121; Całus, K. (2023). The Russian hybrid threat toolbox in Moldova: economic, political and social dimensions. *Hybrid CoE Working Paper*, 23 (April 2023).

<sup>126</sup> Hedenskog, J. (2024). Moldova Signs Security and Defence Partnership With the EU. *SCEEUS Quick Comment*, 30.05.2024.

Whether directly or indirectly attributable to the Security and Defence Partnership with the EU, Moldova's maintained state and societal resilience after the October 2024 elections and referendum are impressive, not least given the scale and gravity of Russian hybrid attacks<sup>127</sup>.

The EU's first sanctions against Russian hybrid threats, however, were only recently imposed – following the EU Council's December 2024 decision to adopt restrictive measures against Russian individuals and entities involved in hybrid activities, including disinformation campaigns, assassinations, and cyber-attacks, with the first-ever listing of the notoriously known GRU Unit 29155 (a covert unit known for its involvement in foreign assassinations and destabilization activities across Europe) among the targets<sup>128</sup>.

As the frequency and severity of hybrid threats across the EU's Eastern neighbourhood and within the EU proper grow, the Union's efforts to bolster both democratic resilience in neighbouring hybrid regimes as well as resilience against hybrid threats ought to grow as well.

#### 4.2. 'Enlargement': from fatigue and a non-option to geopolitical necessity

Rather than involving mere political agreement and transactionalism as practiced in accession politics to other international organizations, the EU's enlargement paradigm envisages a lengthy and cumbersome process of 'member state-building', a proceduralized effort of transforming nation-states into fully-fledged – in terms of rights, capacities and obligations – member states of the ever-changing integration project and European-style – liberal (not just electoral) – democracies<sup>129</sup>. Therein, the use of EU accession conditionality has established itself as a key mechanism of both EU rules – and rule – transfer to candidate states and even rose to the main relations-governing principle itself, as the CEECs' 1990s-2000s accession trajectory vividly showed<sup>130</sup>.

Unlike with the engagement paradigm of interaction, democracy promotion in EU enlargement negotiations involves less hierarchy and more interaction instead, with the acceding countries, too, having access to bargaining and negotiation instruments when it comes to defining and determining the kinds of reforms, their shape and sequence, etc.<sup>131</sup>. EU diplomacy, democracy assistance, conditionality and supervision are all applicable, yet the EU accession negotiating country, too, has a say over modifying, suspending or rejecting reform proposals.

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<sup>127</sup> Nicorici, D. (2024). Moldova has secured its EU path but new challenges arise. *New Eastern Europe*, 03.12.2024, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2024/12/03/moldova-has-secured-its-eu-path-but-new-challenges-arise/>

<sup>128</sup> Council of the EU (2024). Russian hybrid threats: EU agrees first listings in response to destabilising activities against the EU, its member states and partners. *Brussels*, 16.12.2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/12/16/russian-hybrid-threats-eu-agrees-first-listings-in-response-to-destabilising-activities-against-the-eu-its-member-states-and-partners/>

<sup>129</sup> Bickerton, C. J. (2012). *European integration: From nation-states to member states*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Tyushka, A. (2020). Twists and Turns of Democratic Transition and Europeanisation in East-Central Europe Since 1989: Betwixt EU Member and Neighbour State-Building. *Croatian Yearbook of European Law & Policy*, 16(1), 133-177.

<sup>130</sup> Schimmelfennig, F., & Sedelmeier, U. (2004). Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11(4), 661-679.

<sup>131</sup> Grimm, S. (2019). Democracy promotion in EU enlargement negotiations: more interaction, less hierarchy. *Democratization*, 26(5), 851-868.

Even so, *accession conditionality* remains a prevalent mechanism of the EU enlargement process. The EU's March 2024 effort to advance the EU's pre-enlargement reforms sets emphasis on values and the upholding of democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights in both pre- and post-accession practices<sup>132</sup>. This policy emphasis comes with the established possibility of legal enforcement. The CJEU's recent adjudication in Case C-896/19, *Repubblika v Il-Prim Ministru* on 'non-regression' principle in what regards the rule of law and judicial independence, holds promise in view of its application in future infringement and Article 7 TEU proceedings, as well as in pre-accession policy<sup>133</sup>. Values, thus, will remain fundamental as well in the upcoming EU enlargement policy reform<sup>134</sup>, where the critical emphasis on the 'Fundamentals cluster' in EU accession negotiations already now sends a clear signal and, thanks to continued monitoring and safety valves, enhances the EU's ability to depoliticize and technocratically control the process in general, as well as to substantially – not just rhetorically – address the issues of democratic backsliding throughout the process, including by suspending or reversing it completely.

#### 4.2.1. Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and EU's (un)looked-for enlargement east

Three EU's Eastern neighbours – Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova – have long sought to join the EU due to their shared geostrategic interests, pro-European/Western value orientations and their past experiences with Russian both covert and overt aggression, thus seeking to simultaneously escape Russian postcolonial embrace. However, the European Union's enlargement policy, while a significant and – in the eyes of many – 'most successful' policy since its inception, has not explicitly underwritten the EU's relations with its Eastern neighbours. Neither from the early mid-1990s' attempts to build bilateral ties with select post-Soviet states under the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs), nor within multiple European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and even the most ambitious 'new generation' Association Agreements with DCFTA components (AA/DCFTA) concluded with EaP3 (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine), the enlargement perspective could not formally emerge. What is more, both the ENP and the EaP were designed as an alternative to enlargement, as both the official EU discourse and the scholarly analyses confirm. Presenting the key rationale behind the EU's ENP in 2002, Commission President R. Prodi then infamously promised to the neighbours 'everything but institutions'<sup>135</sup>. EU accession endeavours of select Eastern neighbours' have consistently been tamed by the EU institutions, where the countries' 'European aspirations' – and not their 'European perspective' – would remain the agreeable formula in bilateral or mini-lateral (EaP) joint declarations.

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<sup>132</sup> European Commission (2024). COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews. *Brussels*, 20.3.2024, COM(2024) 146 final.

<sup>133</sup> Lazowski, A. (2022) Strengthening the rule of law and the EU pre-accession policy: *Repubblika v. Il-Prim Ministru*. *Common Market Law Review*, 59(6), 1803-1822.

<sup>134</sup> Ocvirk, M. (2024). Balancing Act: Charting the Course for EU Enlargement and Reform. *Wilson Center*, 25.04.2024

<sup>135</sup> Prodi, R. (2002), 'A Wider Europe – A Proximity Policy as the Key to Stability', *Sixth ECSA-World Conference*. Jean Monnet Project, Brussels, 5-6 December 2002, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_02\\_619](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_02_619)



Even when, with the arrival of the ‘geopolitical Commission’ in 2019, the EU’s vision of its own global role and its discourse on enlargement as a geopolitical necessity saw a notable shift, this essentially related to the WB regional context alone.

Only in the wake of the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and the rapid EU accession bids made by Ukraine and, in a matter of days, also by Moldova and Georgia, did the EU’s vision of geostrategic enlargement start embracing Eastern Europe, too (Table 2). This marked a ‘pivotal change’ in member states’ perception of the region<sup>136</sup> and a radical turn away from the EU’s long-lasting strategic neglect of the region and the EU’s enlargement fatigue more generally.

There are even claims that 2022 saw yet another EU ‘*Zeitenwende*’ – a turn of the tides on enlargement in a changing geopolitical landscape where the EU’s deeply transformative approach needs to be strategically adapted to better balance political, security and integration concerns<sup>137</sup>. That the EU’s enlargement policy post-February 2022 became a security – not only identity – matter (that is, got ‘securitized’) finds resonance in political and academic debate<sup>138</sup>.

Some even posit that enlargement’s key rationale evolved: from the long-practiced virtue of ‘transformation’ to an instrumental pursuit of ‘demarcation’ of boundaries of democracy, Europeaness and peace<sup>139</sup>. Youngs<sup>140</sup> argued that the EU’s shift towards offering a membership perspective to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova following the Russian 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine was not only a geopolitically necessary move but also helped further the geostrategy of ‘democratic self-preservation’. Therewith, the process of EU accession should not only include the known steps of legislative approximation and technical harmonization, but also adapt the pre-accession process and develop flexible approaches to help recuperate compromised sovereignty and defend democracy in Ukraine and other Eastern European entrants.

#### 4.2.2. Common values and Europeaness

Yet, while some might argue that the shift towards enlargement as ‘geostrategic necessity’ comes at the expense of the candidate state’s merits or the Union’s procedural rituals, the EU’s renewed emphasis on maintaining – and reinforcing – fundamental values while pursuing geopolitical enlargement speaks to the contrary.

True, on 28 February 2022, the fifth day of the Russian invasion, Ukraine’s President V. Zelenskyy, Prime Minister D. Shmygal and the Speaker of the Parliament R. Stefanchuk, filed an application for ‘immediate’ EU membership

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<sup>136</sup> Dubský, Z., K. Kočí & M. Votoupalová. (2024). Enlargement of the EU Towards the East: A Pivotal Change in EU’s External Policy? *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 7464.

<sup>137</sup> Lippert, B. (2023). EU-Erweiterungspolitik in der Zeitenwende: Zäsur oder business as usual? *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, 33, 475–485.

<sup>138</sup> Orenstein, M.A. (2025). Securitisation of EU policy: how Russia's invasion of Ukraine is changing Europe. *Journal of European Public Policy*, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2025.2497350

<sup>139</sup> Ghincea, M., & Pleșca, L. (2025). From transformation to demarcation: explaining the EU’s shifting motivations of the enlargement policy. *Journal of European Public Policy*, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2025.2498033

<sup>140</sup> Youngs, R. (2022). Ukraine’s EU Membership and the Geostrategy of Democratic Self-Preservation. *Carnegie Europe*, 01.04.2022.



under a (to be adopted) special procedure. Later on, the Ukrainian President kept calling for a ‘fast-track’ accession track to the EU. Similarly, following Ukraine’s application, Georgia and Moldova also made their bids for EU membership on 3 March 2022, hoping for a swift handling of their cases as well (Table 2). While indeed unfolding at the earlier unseen speed and unprecedented EU member states’ unity and resolve, the granting of the EU candidate status already in late 2022 (Ukraine and Moldova) and 2023 (Georgia) and the expedited adoption of the negotiating frameworks for Ukraine and Moldova as part of the EU’s ‘geostrategic investment’ all proceeded in accordance with the same approach and rules as applicable to other – currently Western Balkan – EU entrants (albeit at a much higher speed). This implies principled adherence to common values and compliance with the elaborate accession criteria and the EU accession process.

**Table 2** EU accession paths of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine

EU’s Eastern neighbours / accession states	Ukraine	Moldova	Georgia
<i>AA/DCFTA in force since</i>	1 September 2017	1 July 2016	1 July 2016
<i>Application for EU membership</i>	28 February 2022	3 March 2022	3 March 2022
<i>Granting of an EU candidate status</i>	23 June 2022	23 June 2022	14 December 2023
<i>Opening Accession Negotiations</i>	<i>European Council (EUCO) Decision</i>	14 December 2023	14 December 2023
	<i>First Intergovernmental Conference</i>	25 June 2024	25 June 2024
	<i>Screening process completion</i>	30 September 2025	22 September 2025
	<i>First Negotiations Cluster opening</i>	end-2025/early 2026?	end-2025/early 2026?
<i>Suspending Accession Negotiations/Process</i>	<i>by the EU</i>		27 June 2024 (EUCO declared the process <i>de facto</i> halted) 17 October 2024 (EUCO formally halted the accession process)
	<i>by the accession state</i>		28 November 2024 (Georgian gov’t formally suspended the country’s accession process until 2028)
<i>EU accession state’s level of preparedness and progress</i>	<i>2023 Enlargement Package</i>	some/moderate (2.3)	early/some (1.9)
	<i>2024 Enlargement Package</i>	some/moderate (2.3)	some (2)
	<i>2025 Enlargement Package</i>	some/moderate (2.4)	some/moderate (2.4)
	<i>* Progress in 2025 vs 2024</i>	<i>good progress</i>	<i>very good progress</i>

**Notes:** on EU-Ukraine AA entry into force<sup>141</sup>; on progress assessments in EU Commission’s Enlargement Package report<sup>142</sup>. Source: author’s own.

<sup>141</sup> Due to the Russian hybrid incursion in south-eastern Ukraine since early 2014 and its blackmail politics, the entry in force of the EU-Ukraine AA (with DCFTA component) as a whole was delayed to 1 September 2017, but the AA part of the Agreement was provisionally applied since 1 November 2014 and the DCFTA part since 1 January 2016. The EU-Ukraine AA’s DCFTA was reviewed and modernized in 2025, and the upgraded agreement entered into force on 29 October 2025.

<sup>142</sup> In its annual *Enlargement Package reports*, the European Commission refrains from quantifying accession states’ levels of preparedness or progress, chiefly resorting to qualitative assessments within the key five levels: ‘early stage’, ‘some level of preparation’, ‘moderately prepared’, ‘good level of preparation’, and ‘well advanced’. This scale is often informally quantified, with rankings from 1 to 5 assigned to each level; growingly, more nuanced analyses of the Commission’s reports also consider interim-level indicators (i.e., interim levels of 1.5, 2.5 and 3.5). Resultingly, the *levels of EU accession states’ preparedness (compliance)* for entering the Union can, in principle, receive the following assessments (scored): ‘early’ (1), ‘early/some’ (1.5), ‘some’ (2), ‘some/moderate’ (2.5), ‘moderate’ (3), ‘moderate/good’ (3.5), ‘good’ (4), ‘well advanced’ (5). In turn, the *levels of progress* (scope and pace of reforms towards EU *acquis* alignment) could be quantified as follows: ‘backsliding’ (-4), ‘no progress/stalling’ (0), ‘limited progress’ (1), ‘some progress’ (2), ‘good progress’ (3), and ‘very good progress’ (4). More details on quantified disaggregated levels of progress and preparedness, see e.g.: Sydorenko, S. (2025). EU candidate ranking 2025: leaders, laggards and Ukraine’s critical crossroads. *European Pravda*, 06.11.2025, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/articles/2025/11/6/7224255/>.

*Common values* as stated in Article 2 TEU, and ways to enforce them, are at the heart of EU enlargement and membership exercise<sup>143</sup>. Under the enlargement paradigm, values become enforceable ‘law, after all’<sup>144</sup>. The EU’s uncompromising response to the recent breaches of democratic values in Hungary and Poland, with the Commission initiating the infringement procedures against both member states, showcases that there is a way to mitigate the limitations of Article 7 TEU and the unanimity required for sanctions. Strengthening infringement procedures under Articles 258 and 259 TFEU offers a potential solution to broaden the protection of European values beyond judicial independence, especially in cases of state capture.

After all, the EU’s democratic legitimacy hinges on the robustness of its member states’ democracies, making intervention crucial when constitutionalism deteriorates. Numerous proposals, focusing on institutional action by existing organs and institutions, aim to strengthen the EU’s rule of law oversight. These proposals include interventions by the Council, European Commission, Fundamental Rights Agency, and potential new institutions like a long-debated ‘Copenhagen Commission’. Yet, a comprehensive strategy and an agreed systemic infringement action to address wholesale violations of domestic constitutions and ensure compliance with Article 2 TEU values is still missing. Equally, EU institutional practice in freezing EU funds to enforce EU values shows an uneven and unsustainable approach<sup>145</sup>, especially where the issue matter becomes a key focus in policy (or even episodic decision-making) bargains with concerned EU member states, as it has been the case with Hungary. Against this backdrop, the EU’s – preventive – Rule of Law Mechanism (RLM)<sup>146</sup> (of which the annual Rule of Law Report (RLR) is the cornerstone), in development since 2019 and in force since July 2023, gains prominence as a key tool in countering democratic backsliding. It, furthermore, promises to solidify the EU’s ‘new conditionality regime’<sup>147</sup> and further constitutionalize values as the EU’s cornerstone<sup>148</sup>.

The European Union’s enlargement process, particularly with Eastern European countries, solidified the importance of democratic values and the rule of law. While these values were initially considered political aspirations and the degree of value ‘sharedness’ legitimately varied under the relational paradigm of EU engagement, they became legally binding, in their entirety, through the accession process and the joining of the

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<sup>143</sup> Concerns about democratic standards and institutions of the EU’s new member states, in fact, delayed the 2004 enlargement round for two EU entrants, Bulgaria and Romania, until 2007. Moreover, an ad hoc mechanism of post-accession democratic compliance was introduced, and so beyond the EU Treaty requirements. The *Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM)* was put into place for Romania and Bulgaria after their accession and remained in force until 7 October 2023. Equally, it could serve as inspiration for the ongoing accession negotiations, albeit the EU is evidently prioritizing now pre-accession compliance of candidate states.

<sup>144</sup> Scheppele, K.L., D.V. Kochenov & B. Grabowska-Moroz. (2020). EU Values Are Law, after All: Enforcing EU Values through Systemic Infringement Actions by the European Commission and the Member States of the European Union. *Yearbook of European Law*, 39(1), 3–121.

<sup>145</sup> Scheppele, K. L., & Morijn, J. (2025). Money for nothing? EU institutions’ uneven record of freezing EU funds to enforce EU values. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 32(2), 474-497; Blauburger, M., & Sedelmeier, U. (2025). Sanctioning democratic backsliding in the European Union: Transnational salience, negative intergovernmental spillover, and policy change. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 32(2), 365-391.

<sup>146</sup> European Commission (2023). European Rule of Law mechanism: Methodology for the preparation of the Annual Rule of Law Report, [https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/63\\_1\\_52674\\_rol\\_methodology\\_en.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/63_1_52674_rol_methodology_en.pdf)

<sup>147</sup> Coman, R., & Buzogány, A. (2024). The European Union’s Response to the Rule of Law Crisis and the Making of the New Conditionality Regime. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 62, 102-112.

<sup>148</sup> Kainer, F. (2023). Die Konstitutionalisierung der Werte des Art. 2 EUV – zwischen Funktion und Axiom. *integration*, 3/2024, 207-223.

Treaty on European Union. In particular, Art 2 TEU states that '[t]he Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities' and that '[t]hese values are common to the member states [...]'. Even though the founding treaties of the 1950s did not include any reference to the above values, the EU has always been a 'community of values' and a 'community of (the rule of) law', or *Rechtsgemeinschaft*. The mounting challenges of a values-driven foreign policy in a growingly geopolitical world notwithstanding, the role of values in EU external relations, particularly with the immediate neighbours, has occupied a prominent place. Factoring of pragmatic calculations and approaches thereto has led, at the same time, to legitimate questions on whether the values aren't on the retreat in EU external action lately<sup>149</sup>.

Recent studies confirmed that, while ever-diverging globally since the 1980s, values tend to converge regionally, where 'geographic proximity has emerged as an increasingly strong correlate of value similarity'<sup>150</sup>.

As the countries of the emerging 'new Eastern Europe' region bode farewell to their post-Soviet past and current trajectories, a series of pro-democratic and westbound social upheavals and revolutions – from Georgia's 2003 Rose revolution to Ukraine's 2004 Orange and 2013/14 Euromaidan revolutions and Moldova's 2009 Twitter revolution – signalled such a values compass reorientation.

Ukraine has been manifesting its pro-European/Western value orientation ever since regaining its independence, and, most notably, throughout the three revolutions (1990 Granite Revolution, 2004 Orange Revolution and 2013/14 Euromaidan/Dignity Revolution) as well as the current war against Russian aggression, where both Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and its Europeanness are being defended.

Ukraine's European values also stand at the epicentre of the defensive war against Russian invasion. Strikingly, Russia even framed its aggression against Ukraine as a war against Western values, among a few other pretexts and justifications of this aggression officially voiced<sup>151</sup>.

Notably, amidst war, Ukraine pursues further convergence with European values as value issues of sorts (from dignity and gender to LGBTQI and sustainable labour or environment) receive increased public attention and are also addressed legislatively<sup>152</sup>. Wartime opinion polls in Ukraine also affirm that, even facing the protracted war of aggression and thereby inflicted severe humanitarian and socio-economic suffering, Ukrainians' commitment

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<sup>149</sup> Damen, M. (2022). *Values on the retreat? The role of values in the EU's external policies*. Brussels: EPRS (PE 639.318 – March 2022), EXPO\_STU(2022)639318\_EN-2.

<sup>150</sup> Jackson, J.C., & Medvedev, D. (2024). Worldwide divergence of values. *Nature Communications*, 15:2650, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-024-46581-5>. Here p.2.

<sup>151</sup> Williams, D. (2024). Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine is part of his revolution against the West. *The Economist*, 20.06.2024, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2024/06/20/vladimir-putins-war-against-ukraine-is-part-of-his-revolution-against-the-west>; Ofman, D. (2024). Russia cites 'traditional values' as justification for war with Ukraine. *TheWorld*, 10.01.2024, <https://theworld.org/stories/2024/01/10/russia-cites-traditional-values-justification-war-ukraine>

<sup>152</sup> Kaplan, I. (2022). The Effect of War on Ukraine's Values. *ZOIS Spotlight 28/2022*, 20.07.2022, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/the-effect-of-war-on-ukraines-values>

to democratic values and European future firmly endures<sup>153</sup>. Two years into the war with Russia, Ukrainian President V. Zelenskyy, while speaking at the February 2024 press conference, characterized Ukraine's EU accession as the country's 'historical and value-driven choice' that Russia tried to undo but, from now on, 'non-one would be able to change'<sup>154</sup>. Alongside momentous geopolitical choices and commitments, Ukraine's commitment to EU values is also anchored in its legal system that has been growingly adopting an EU law-conform posture and interpretation of laws<sup>155</sup>.

Just like Ukraine's pro-democratic and pro-European value orientation, Georgia's European identity, too, has been forged through crises and war with Russia<sup>156</sup>. Even if political rhetoric and practice in the country recently started to deviate away from the European choice, this value orientation remains deeply rooted and sustained at the societal level. In terms of approximation with the EU's laws and regulations, under the framework of the lasting EU-Georgia Association Agreement, Georgia, too, has been more advanced than Ukraine or Moldova<sup>157</sup>.

Moldova's rooted connection to European history and myths, in spite of domestic political contestations, time and again proved the country's European value orientation and pro-EU course, albeit the firmness and sustainability remained an issue. October 2024 presidential elections and EU accession referendum were both won by a tiny margin of the majority's pro-EU choice. September 2025 parliamentary elections, too, were won by the ruling pro-EU Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) by just over 50% of the vote and 55 seats secured out of 101, thus retaining a reduced majority government.

Such progress in values convergence notwithstanding, the understandings and practices of both the democracy at large as well as its key components, including the rule of law, show variance.

#### 4.2.3. Merits – not mercy – underwriting EU accession conditionality and process

Since when it got proceduralized and routinized, the EU enlargement policy post-Copenhagen saw both distinct dynamics and evolving approach, with growing issue politicization, process technocratization as well as overall protraction. Whereas the 1993 Copenhagen criteria<sup>158</sup> *alone* undergirded the first post-Cold War stage of EU

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<sup>153</sup> Bakke, K. M., Dahl, M., & Rickard, K. (2025). Conflict exposure and democratic values: Evidence from wartime Ukraine. *Journal of Peace Research*, 62(5), 1376-1392.

<sup>154</sup> Zelenskyy, V. (2024). ЕС – це наш історичний і ціннісний вибір, і змінювати цей курс ніхто не зможе. *Офіційне інтернет-представництво Президента України*, 25 лютого 2024 року <https://www.president.gov.ua/news/yes-ce-nash-istorichnij-i-cinnisnij-vibir-i-zminyuvati-cej-k-89301>

<sup>155</sup> Komarova, T.V. (2024). EU Values as a Guide for Ukrainian Legal System. *Problems of Legality*. Special Issue, 61-82. <https://doi.org/10.21564/2414-990X.166.315206>.

<sup>156</sup> Minesashvili, S. (2022). *European identities during wars and revolutions*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>157</sup> This particularly applies to Georgia's approximation with the DCFTA-related norms, see g.g.: Zygierevicz, A. (ed). (2018). Association Agreements between the EU and Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine: European Implementation Assessment. *EPRS Study*, PE 621.833 (June 2018), p.145-146.

<sup>158</sup> To address these post-Cold War geopolitical changes, particularly the democratization of Central and Eastern Europe, the EU formulated the *Copenhagen Criteria* at the European Council meeting in Copenhagen 1993. These criteria, outlining fundamental

enlargement, that is the ‘big bang’ enlargement to re-democratizing Central and Eastern European countries, the following – fatigued and protracted – wave of South-Eastern European (including Western Balkan countries and Turkey) stalled throughout almost two decades since the 2003 Thessaloniki promise until late 2021 (only Croatia acceded to the EU in 2013), not least due to the EU’s much-worried absorption capacity and internal reform demands as well as the ever-expanding and growingly complex enlargement methodology itself. The ongoing, since early 2022, third wave of a re-dynamized – geostrategic enlargement<sup>159</sup> – is guided by a twofold logic: the sense of geopolitical urgency and the caution of insufficient and unsustainable democratic progress of the EU candidate/accession states.

Thus, EU enlargement policy now drives the creation of more detailed rule-of-law requirements than set in EU treaties and practised beforehand, not least thanks to the lessons learnt from the 2004 enlargement. The need for clear democratic standards and a consistent approach to the rule of law has become crucial for future expansions, seeking to ensure that new members apply EU law and duly sustain democratic governance, benefiting current members too.

The first steps in this direction were undertaken early on, right after the 2004/07 ‘big bang’ enlargement and the ensuing ‘enlargement fatigue’ ever since. In 2006, the Commission introduced a ‘*Renewed Consensus*’ that tightened conditionality at all stages of the accession negotiations, along with a stronger focus on pre-accession funding to institution-building, rule of law, and anti-corruption measures. The EU’s 2012 ‘*New Approach*’ prioritized chapters on justice, freedom, security, and fundamental rights in the negotiations. With the arrival of the new ‘geopolitical’ European Commission in 2019, three inter-related grand debates unfolded and, largely, reached their largely conclusive end by end-2023: the first one on ‘EU reform first’ versus ‘enlargement first’, the second one on the ‘classical enlargement’ versus ‘staged accession’ (or indeed ‘gradual approach’)<sup>160</sup>, and the third one on ‘individual merit-based accession’ versus ‘regional/group approach’.

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conditions for EU membership, included stable democratic institutions, a functioning market economy, and the ability to meet obligations like adhering to the political, economic, and monetary union’s aims.

<sup>159</sup> In both the EU discourse and the literature, it features as both a ‘geopolitical enlargement’ or ‘geostrategic enlargement’. For instance, Schimmelfennig (2024) distinguishes three main phases of EU enlargement: ‘transformative’ (1990–2004), ‘politicized’ (2005–2021), and ‘geopoliticized’ (2022–onwards), see: Schimmelfennig, F. (2024). Geopolitical Enlargement. In: Jopp, M., Pollak, J. (eds), *The European Union’s Geopolitics: The Lackluster World Power* (Cham: Springer), pp.79–98. See also: Ghincea, M., & Pleșca, L. (2025). From transformation to demarcation: explaining the EU’s shifting motivations of the enlargement policy. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 32(12), 2999–3033.

<sup>160</sup> Oftentimes treated interchangeably, the ‘gradual integration’ and ‘staged accession’ models refer to distinct conceptions of EU enlargement post-2020s. Whereas the ‘*gradual integration*’ model more echoes differentiated integration modalities, with ‘access [to EU policies and programmes] before accession’, the ‘*staged accession*’ model foresees a formalization of such gradual integration, clearly defining a few stages to be passed by accession states on their way to full EU membership, allowing them to participate in some EU policies and programmes, including partial access to structural funds, before actual accession, but limiting, at the same time, voting/decision-making rights of new members during an initial period. On ‘gradual integration/accession’, see: Buras, P. (2025). Gradual integration: Bringing aspiring members closer to the EU. *ECFR Report*, June 2025; Lehne, S., Nechev, Z., and Grieveson, R. (2025). Access before Accession: Rethinking the EU’s Gradual Integration. *Carnegie Paper*, 27 August 2025. On ‘staged accession’, see: Emerson, M., M. Lazarević, S. Blockmans & S. Subotić. (2021). A Template for Staged Accession to the EU. *CEPS*, October 2021, <https://cdn.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/A-Template-for-Staged-Accession-to-the-EU.pdf> ; M. Lazarević, S. Blockmans, S. Subotić & M. Emerson. (2023). Template 2.0 for Staged Accession to the EU. *CEPS*, August 2023, <https://cdn.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Template-2.0-for-Staged-Accession-to-the-EU.pdf>

The *first debate*, captured i.a. in the expert work commissioned by the German and French governments, prioritized EU internal reform to make EU institutions ‘enlargement-ready’<sup>161</sup>, while not finally decided yet (officially), shows signs of a shifting preference for ‘enlargement first’ (tentatively by 2030 as the latest) or at least ‘decoupling’ of EU enlargement and reform imperatives – not least because the Russian invasion of Ukraine has decidedly reversed the EU’s dilemmatic ‘*enlargement-reform nexus*’ at the expense of the latter one. Such a turn evidently was met with enthusiasm in Kyiv, Chisinau, and initially in Tbilisi, as well as across the Western Balkan capitals that had been caught in the EU enlargement ‘purgatory’ for all too long.

The *second debate*, while concerning for both EU entrants (in light of a potential politicization and protraction of their EU accession) and the EU proper (given the pitfalls of under-incentivized and, as a result, deferred democratic transformation), saw the win of the ‘*staged accession/gradual integration*’ paradigms<sup>162</sup>. What is more, this approach had been partially pursued in the EU’s practice of relations with the associated Eastern neighbours (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) even before it was deemed a strategic course. Concerns remain as to whether the accelerated (staged whether gradual) integration into the single market without a clear and sustainable commitment to deeply transformative reforms would not accrue to the rise of a ‘post-normative non-transformative enlargement’<sup>163</sup> paradigm?

Finally, the *third debate* was triggered by the EU-internal considerations of making democratic conditionality more credible and sustainable at the pre-accession stage, as well as the pressures emanating from candidate countries themselves in light of the ‘bundling’ of their accession paths and the overall politicization of the process. The French non-paper on ‘Reforming the European Union accession process’, presented in November 2019, led to the adoption in February 2020 of the ‘*Revised enlargement methodology*’<sup>164</sup>, and with it, a fundamental rethink of the procedural side of the process. Bringing in dynamism through a regular top-level dialogue, clustering of the negotiation chapters (and introducing safeguards against democratic backsliding through ‘overall balance’ and ‘reversibility’ clauses) and laying out the opportunities for early alignment and integration into EU policies, the Revised enlargement methodology also clearly prioritizes a *merit-based*

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<sup>161</sup> The Group of Twelve (2023). Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century. *Report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform*, Paris-Berlin, 18 September 2023, [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/20230919\\_group\\_of\\_twelve\\_report\\_updated14.12.2023\\_cle88fb88.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/20230919_group_of_twelve_report_updated14.12.2023_cle88fb88.pdf)

<sup>162</sup> The European Council’s 2024 Conclusions embraced ‘*gradual integration*’ as part of its 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda; the European Commission also confirmed its support ‘in principle’ for gradual integration. The revival of the ‘*staged accession*’ model was noted more recently, in late 2025. Faced with persistent Hungarian veto over Ukraine’s EU accession, as well as anticipating further ‘vetocracy’ among other current members, the EU started exploring, in October 2025, the possibility of a staged accession, whereby new EU members could be joining without full voting rights, implying, effectively, the transition to a two-tier membership model. However, a month later, European Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos opposed such an idea of first- and second-rank membership in the EU, emphasizing that all future member states must enjoy full rights and equal standing within the European Union. See: Von der Burchard, H., and Vinocur, N. (2025). New EU members could join without full voting rights. *POLITICO*, 20.10.2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/new-eu-members-could-join-without-full-voting-veto-rights/>.

<sup>163</sup> Hovic, N. (2024). Toward a post-normative nontransformative enlargement of the Union? *EU Law Live*, 19.06.2024, <https://eulawlive.com/op-ed-toward-a-post-normative-nontransformative-enlargement-of-the-union/>

<sup>164</sup> European Commission (2020). COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans (COM(2020) 57 final), *Brussels*, 5.2.2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0057>



*approach*, making the enlargement/accession process more demanding than in the past. In particular, the Revised enlargement methodology now features 6 clusters of negotiations: (1) the so-called ‘Fundamentals’<sup>165</sup> that are first to be opened and last to be closed, with an ‘overall balance’ clause, currently applied to Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia to be observed; (2) Internal Market; (3) Competitiveness & inclusive growth; (4) Green agenda & sustainable connectivity; (5) Resources, agriculture & cohesion; (6) External relations. Along with the introduced detailed benchmarks, the emphasis on Chapters 23 and 24 further solidifies the pre-accession conditionality on the rule of law, requiring candidate countries to demonstrate a credible track record in judicial reform, anti-corruption efforts, and fundamental rights protection. This evidently lifts the rule of law up to be ‘a central criterion’ and a key safeguard from democratic backsliding before and after EU accession, argues Ognjanoska<sup>166</sup>. The unanimity principle for opening and closing both clusters and chapters is thus far maintained, albeit, in view of the mounting challenges of the process protraction in Ukraine’s case (as it had been with North Macedonia until 2020), the debate unfolds how to at least partially transition to a Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) decision-making.

Notably, the Revised methodology *retroactively* applies also to WB accession states that were already in the process of opening accession talks or amidst accession negotiations. The post-February 2022 initiated EU accession process of the nominally three Eastern European neighbours, too, is guided thereby.

The relaunch of the EU accession process for the Western Balkan countries builds, among others, on efforts to bolster EU values. The newly launched, in May 2024, Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, while providing EUR 6 billion EU support, undertakes to strengthen the rule of law and economic governance, bolster EU values, and enhance both conditionality and transparency of the process<sup>167</sup>.

Inadvertently, the EU’s sudden eastward enlargement, triggered by the Russian invasion, catalyzed elite-driven democratization efforts in Moldova, enabling as well top-down reduction of Russian influence<sup>168</sup>.

In Ukraine’s own case as well, the external threat factor of Russian aggression seems to have both emboldened the EU’s ambitious agenda-setting and the pursuit of the wartime rule of law conditionality in its relations with Ukraine, strongly resembling in both its design and substance the EU conditionality regime applied to Western Balkan states – especially in what regards judicial reforms and effective anticorruption institution-building<sup>169</sup>. The ongoing war, furthermore, has accelerated the EU integration-oriented reforms due to Ukraine’s domestic

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<sup>165</sup> The *Fundamentals cluster* (Cluster 1) includes the following negotiating chapters: 23 – Judiciary and fundamental rights; 24 – Justice, freedom and security; 5 – Public procurement; 18 – Statistics; 32 – Financial control; as well as three cross-cut issue areas – (I) Economic criteria, (II) Functioning of democratic institutions, and (III) Public administration reform.

<sup>166</sup> Ognjanoska, L. (2021). Promoting the rule of law in the EU enlargement policy: a twofold challenge. *Croatian Yearbook of European Law & Policy*, 17(1), 237-277.

<sup>167</sup> New support plan for Western Balkans: better governance, bolstering EU values. *European Parliament – News*, 11.03.2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240311IPR19202/new-support-plan-for-western-balkans-better-governance-bolstering-eu-values>

<sup>168</sup> Burmester, I. (2025). Crisis as a catalyst for democratisation: how Russia’s escalation of the war in Ukraine facilitated democratic progress in Moldova. *Contemporary Politics*, 1-26.

<sup>169</sup> Rabinovych, M. (2024). EU Enlargement Policy Goes East: Historical and Comparative Takes on the EU’s Rule of Law Conditionality Vis-à-Vis Ukraine. *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 16(3), 715-737.



needs and pressures. While conditionality has driven, for instance, reforms targeting high-level corruption, practical considerations, such as the overwhelming number of war crimes, have also catalyzed changes in law enforcement and prosecution practices. The war has, therefore, changed domestic elites' compliance calculations, making reforms more feasible, and increased the EU's leverage, making European integration a matter of 'survival'<sup>170</sup>.

Both in Ukraine and Moldova, therefore, the EU's 'advance' promise of the candidacy and eventual membership in the Union, alongside the external threat of Russian aggression, helped mobilize pro-democracy support in the countries and rally around both democracy and the European future. Onuch<sup>171</sup> argues, in her survey-based study, that, contrary to the expectation that prolonged crises would lead to a decline in democratic sentiment, Ukrainians' 'rallying around democracy' in 2019-2022 saw a remarkable surge, with 76% agreeing, in late May 2022, that European-style democracy is preferable to other forms of government. This shift in public opinion was arguably driven by those who previously supported authoritarianism or were undecided about democracy, as well as those who were previously indifferent to the form of government.

In her 2022 State of the Union speech, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen indeed acknowledged that both Western Balkan and three Eastern European states belong to the 'European family'<sup>172</sup>, thus emphasizing value congruence, their pro-democratic push and ever-closer policy alignment.

By contrast, the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine had an inverse effect on Georgia's political course. Drifting on the waves of opportunist geopolitical illiberalism for a few years already (while simultaneously keeping up the rhetoric of pro-EU orientation), the country's democracy ratings started decreasing well before February 2022. Whilst at the moment of filing its EU membership bid in March 2022 Georgia still was ahead of a number of then-EU candidate states from the Western Balkans (in particular, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia) and Turkey, it exhibited a lower score of liberal democracy (as per both Freedom House and V-Dem indices) than the 2004 EU entrants from Central and Eastern Europe<sup>173</sup>.

#### 4.2.4. *The EU's rule of law imperative and democratic progress of Eastern European entrants*

The EU's rule of law imperative, thus, keeps informing the process, even if new – geopolitical necessity and urgency – considerations came to co-shape it post-2022. This focus on the rule of law is driven by both geopolitical concerns (Russian and other players' uses of strategic corruption to buy political allies and undermine state institutions and democracies), EU's own past mistakes in enlargement (especially, the 'big bang'

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<sup>170</sup> Shyrokykh, K., K. Busol & D. Koval. (2025). European Integration, and Democracy and Human Rights Reforms in Ukraine in the Wartime. In: M. Rabinovych and A. Pintsch (eds.), *Ukraine's Thorny Path to the EU* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan).

<sup>171</sup> Onuch, O. (2022). Why Ukrainians are rallying around democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 33(4), 37-46.

<sup>172</sup> Von der Leyen, U. (2022). 2022 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen. *Brussels*, 14.09.2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_22\\_5493](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_5493)

<sup>173</sup> Silagadze, G. (2022). How does Georgia's democracy compare with countries granted EU candidacy? *The Caucasus Datablog*, 24.05.2022, <https://oc-media.org/features/datablog-how-does-georgias-democracy-compare-with-countries-granted-eu-candidacy/>

enlargement of 2004/07, where the EU assumed progress in governance was linear and one-way), and the need to safeguard the EU's single market and democratic values (avoiding importing of problems with democracy, such as legislative, executive or overall state capture), as well as to keep its overall governance system resilient against internal dysfunctions and external influences<sup>174</sup>. So, the European Union's 2023 Enlargement Package, released by the Commission on 8 November 2023, prioritizes the rule of law for new members, particularly Ukraine and Moldova, to ensure their readiness for membership and protect the EU's legal order<sup>175</sup>. At the same time, by expediting the process (and creatively deploying decision-making ahead of 'recommendations' furthering), it evidently strikes a balance between geopolitics and merit, not least as the countries directly threatened by Russian aggression, like Ukraine and Moldova, need firm reassurance of inclusion while facing deep – crisis- and wartime – reforms for EU membership.

The picture of the *2023 Enlargement Package* reports was quite unequivocal, with Montenegro and North Macedonia named the two front-runners of the process, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo assessed as considerably lagging behind, whereas the Eastern European Trio (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) positioned in the middle. If broken down into separate categories, Ukraine scored the highest political ranking it while did less well in the economics; strikingly, Serbia scored the highest ranking in economics and almost the lowest on political grounds, reflecting the worsening state of democracy. When it comes to the speed of democratic reforms, Moldova was deemed being the leader (closely followed by Ukraine). Still, measuring against that record speed, Ukraine would still need to accelerate reforms ten times faster to catch up with the Western Balkans; even for Moldova, with its 2023 speed of reforms, the forecast had been that it would necessitate 15 years to fully comply with all accession Clusters' requirements<sup>176</sup>. In Ukraine's case, both the war and the martial law in force, as well as the wartime human capital outflow, further complicate the progress. On the other hand, while indeed martial law in Ukraine has suspended transparency controls and limited media freedom (resulting in Ukraine being said to currently experience an 'autocratization' episode, on V-Dem's polyarchy index), it also offers a long overdue opportunity to implement the anti-oligarch law and root out corruption much more resolutely and uncompromisingly<sup>177</sup>. Debates unfold as to whether Ukraine should criminalize wartime corruption as an act of 'state treason' to help resolve the lasting problem.

The *2024 Enlargement Package* reports<sup>178</sup> demonstrate, however, that Ukraine, while experiencing in 2024 significant progress in all six areas covered in the rule of law chapters, has achieved only the level of 'some' preparedness across Chapters 23 and 24, judiciary reform, anti-corruption measures and freedom of expression.

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<sup>174</sup> Grabbe, H. (2023). Rule of law rules future European Union enlargement. *Bruegel*, 09.11.2023.

<sup>175</sup> European Commission (2023). 2023 Enlargement Package, 08.11.2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_5633](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5633)

<sup>176</sup> Sydorenko, S. (2023). Рейтинг євроінтеграції-2023: хто випереджає Україну на шляху до ЄС та чи реально їх наздогнати. *Evropeyska Pravda*, 13.11.2023, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2023/11/13/7173415/>

<sup>177</sup> Rudolph, J., N.L. Eisen & C. Bertron. (2023). Ukraine's Anti-Corruption Front: Helping Ukrainians Win the War and the Peace by Having Their Backs against Oligarchy. *GMF / Brookings*, June 2023, [https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/Ukraine%20Anticorruption%20Front\\_digital.pdf](https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/Ukraine%20Anticorruption%20Front_digital.pdf)

<sup>178</sup> European Commission (2024). 2024 Enlargement Package, 30.10.2024, [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30_en)

Despite the ongoing conflict, Ukraine's parliament continues to function effectively, with the government having limited recourse to urgent procedures. This has resulted in a reduction in the time available for assessing new laws and diminished the role of oversight in parliamentary proceedings. Ukraine has also adopted key legislation in various areas, including the protection of national minorities, a request from Hungary that threatened to obstruct Ukraine's accession.

Similarly, Moldova's level of preparedness on democracy and the rule of law was comparably assessed as 'some'. The 2024 Enlargement Package report highlighted that Chisinau continued to implement policies aimed at expediting EU integration, including adopting strategies for safeguarding human rights and combating human trafficking. Like Ukraine, Moldova also made progress in vetting judges and prosecutors. However, challenges such as a lack of public trust in the reforms, political pressure in the media sector, and intimidation of journalists persisted. Furthermore, the reforms took place against the backdrop of enduring oligarchic influence and Russian attempts at destabilization, including interference in Moldova's elections. The outcome of the October 2024 referendum on enshrining EU accession in the constitution, which passed with a narrow margin, underscored the arduous challenges ahead for Chisinau, especially in view of then-upcoming autumn 2025 parliamentary elections.

Remarkably, even the frontrunners from the WB region showed some to moderate progress, too, with Montenegro being in the lead with an overall 'moderate' preparedness, and both Albania and North Macedonia showing 'some/moderate' levels. With other candidates showing either limited or even no progress, Georgia happens to be the only accession country thus far that experienced backsliding on the reforms, and democratic backsliding more generally. This made many argue that the EU's re-dynamized post-2022 enlargement process faces a disconnect between official reports and public statements. While EU leaders emphasize democracy and the rule of law conditionality, candidate countries show limited progress, with some even backsliding on reforms.

The most recent 2025 *Enlargement Package* reports<sup>179</sup> sets the record straight: in Georgia, 'the situation sharply deteriorated, with serious democratic backsliding marked by a rapid erosion of the rule of law and severe restrictions on fundamental rights' – hence, the Commission urged the Georgian authorities to reverse the course. In light of Georgia's continued backsliding, the Commission also openly stated that it considers Georgia 'a candidate country in name only'. As for Ukraine and Moldova, the Commission's Communication reaffirmed that, 'despite Russia's unrelenting war of aggression, Ukraine remains strongly committed to its EU accession path' and, in spite of 'continuous hybrid threats', Moldova, too, has 'significantly advanced on its accession path', with both countries completing the screening process in end-September 2025<sup>180</sup>. At the same time, the Commission noted that, alongside Albania and Montenegro, Moldova and Ukraine have made substantial progress on fundamental issues of the rule of law, and that these countries are accumulating relevant experience in the fight against corruption. Thus, Ukraine and Moldova have found themselves among four frontrunners in EU accession-bound reforms in 2025. Alongside the most significant leap across the EU accession chapters, Moldova's impressive progress in judicial reform, anti-corruption measures as well as its democratic resilience

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<sup>179</sup> European Commission (2025). 2025 Enlargement Package shows progress towards EU membership for key enlargement partners. *Press Release*, Brussels, 4.11.2025, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_25\\_2584](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_2584)

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

against Russian hybrid interference made it a standout performer of the 2025 Enlargement Package reports. For Ukraine, the 2025 Enlargement Package report, which for the first time noted the country's significant progress in most areas of reform, has been arguably the best report in three years in terms of its positive assessment of Ukraine's strong commitment to its EU accession path amidst of repelling Russian aggression, but warned against interfering in the work of the NABU and SAPO, the country's two premier independent anti-corruption bodies<sup>181</sup>. The Commission confirmed, thus, the readiness for opening of the negotiation clusters 1, 2 and 6, with the others, too, being on good track to be ready for opening by the end 2025. As from January 2026, Moldova and Ukraine are joining the EU's free-roaming zone. Right upon the 2025 Enlargement Package release, the EU also earmarked the fifth disbursement of over EUR 1.8 billion financial assistance to Kyiv under the Ukraine Facility. Some rightfully see such EU openings and offerings as an expression of positive pre-accession conditionality at work.

Creative uses and '*postdating*'<sup>182</sup> of the EU's pre-accession conditionality vis-à-vis three candidates of the EU's first 'geostrategic enlargement' and especially with regard to war-torn Ukraine showcase, along with path dependency and Western Balkan analogizing<sup>183</sup>, also a good fit with the EU's shift to geopolitics as well as its crisis management policy's emphasis on resilience<sup>184</sup>. There are, however, notable shifts and exceptions in the EU's wartime RoL conditionality vis-à-vis Ukraine: while emphasizing merit-based approach, the EU resorts to positive ex-ante conditionality (Ukraine's macro-financial assistance within and beyond the 'Ukraine Facility' or the eyed post-war reconstruction funds), prioritizes institution-building over substantive legislation (decentralization, support for the functioning of anti-corruption institutions or judicial self-governance bodies) and 'normalizes' the dominance of the executive as well as certain limitations on media and political freedoms under the martial law and in war context more generally – all to provide a lifeline for Ukraine and preserve its weak but still democratic foundations.

The above discussion suggests that the EU's enlargement strategy for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia should prioritize democratization and support civil society. While Ukraine shows unprecedented resistance and progress in wartime reform and Moldova, too, demonstrates promise with its recent reforms and electorally sustained democratic choice, Georgia remains stuck in a dominant-party system that is furthermore growingly featuring elements of authoritarian rule. The EU's shifting *democracy-protection approach* should, thus, be in

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<sup>181</sup> In mid-July 2025, Ukraine's President V. Zelenskyy signed the parliamentary bill no.12414 into law, which was widely seen as an encroachment on the independence of the country's key anti-corruption bodies, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office of Ukraine (SAPO). Instantly, over ten thousand protesters gathered in Kyiv alone to demonstrate against the newly passed law. Soon, it has become the largest country-wide protest since outbreak of Russia's full-scale aggression (a protest of predominantly young Ukrainians, self-proclaimed as 'people with cardboard boxes'), which helped revert back parts of the envisaged changes. This demonstrated that Ukraine's democracy sustains even in wartime (and past the constitutionally mandated electoral cycle). See, e.g.: Gumenyuk, N. (2025). The Real Limits of Ukrainian Power. *Foreign Affairs*, 29.08.2025.

<sup>182</sup> In contrast to the regular procedure, European Commission's Opinions about Ukraine's, Moldova's and Georgia's meeting of EU accession criteria were '*postdated*', that is provided 'in advance' – and ahead of the countries' actual fulfilment of the 'follow-up conditionality' (i.e. Commission recommendations formulated later on in the 2023 Enlargement package reports).

<sup>183</sup> Rabinovych, M. (2024). EU Enlargement Policy Goes East: Historical and Comparative Takes on the EU's Rule of Law Conditionality Vis-à-Vis Ukraine. *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 16(3), 715-737.

<sup>184</sup> Rabinovych, M., & Pintsch, A. (2024). Political conditionality as an EU foreign policy and crisis management tool. The case of EU wartime political conditionality vis-à-vis Ukraine. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(4): 491-512, here p.501-503.

principle ‘*differentiated*’<sup>185</sup> and extensively include citizen participation, empowering civil society to ensure sustainable democratization and political stability across the EU’s Eastern European entrants.

Moreover, a *differentiated EU accession* pace, too, seems to be on the EU’s emerging agenda vis-à-vis the region and within its new enlargement philosophy more generally. In this sense, both the ‘merit-based’ approach and the newly introduced principle of ‘decoupling’ EU accession paths of candidate states within and across the regions, hold potential to signal respective warnings against democratic backsliding as well as act as a real leverage on their own, thus limiting ‘free-riding’ opportunities as encompassed in the previous region-/group-focused enlargement paradigm. Whilst in the case of Georgia, this decoupling happened post-factum, the EU’s early 2025 decision to further decouple the Moldova-Ukraine ‘package’ manifests as democratic hedging against current and future uncertainties.

Last but not least, the enlargement relationality encompasses a more *dialogical* form of interaction with the EU’s accession states, with both the process, progress and compliance aspects of it gaining salience as subjects of negotiations. The EU’s growing embrace of the dialogical dimension was vividly manifested in the first-of-its-kind EU Enlargement Summit, held on 4 November 2025, which brought together EU and candidate country leaders to help amplify the voices of candidate countries and jointly discuss the future of European enlargement – and the EU entrants’ struggles on their accession paths.

### 4.3. ‘*Estrangement*’: from ‘critical engagement’ to disengagement and counter-autocratization

Engagement with the neighbours east and south has been the EU’s quasi-‘default’ modus operandi in external action, as discussed above. Estrangement, just like enlargement, belongs to exceptional forms of interaction. Unlike enlargement, however, estrangement is an EU-atypical form of relationality vis-à-vis neighbours. Within its Eastern neighbourhood, the EU has long pursued varied modes of ‘critical engagement’ even with firm autocratic – and further regressing to authoritarianism – regimes as Lukashenka’s Belarus or Aliyev’s Azerbaijan for the past few decades<sup>186</sup>. Moreover, the EU’s recourse to ‘strategic non-engagement’ with Belarus before 2004 has been vehemently criticized as an undue and counter-productive strategy undermining the EU’s normative influence and hegemony in the region<sup>187</sup>. Klinke even argued<sup>188</sup> that ‘the presence of an agenda of non-engagement is a thorn in the European Union’s flesh’. Given that, but also in view of the unwinding zero-sum great-power competition logic vis-à-vis Russia in the region, the EU kept engaging with Ukraine in times of

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<sup>185</sup> Sirbiladze, I., & Ventura, E. (2023). The EU’s Eastern Enlargement and Differentiated Democracy Support. *Carnegie Europe*, 11.09.2023.

<sup>186</sup> Nizhnikau, R. (2024). Catch 2020: explaining the performance of the EU policy towards Belarus. *International Politics*, 61(6), 1151-1173, here p.1159-1161; Alieva, L. (2014). Azerbaijan and the impact of the lack of democratisation on relations with the EU. *European View*, 13(1), 39-48.

<sup>187</sup> Klinke, I. (2006). The European Union’s Strategic Non-Engagement in Belarus Challenging the Hegemonic Notion of the EU as a Toothless Value Diffuser. *Perspectives: Review of International Affairs*, (27), 25-43.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.

democratic regression under Yanukovych (2010-2014) and did not hesitate offering the biggest incentive ever then, that is, the Association Agreement<sup>189</sup> – not least to hedge against Ukraine’s possible realignment away from Europe. Still, exceptional and episodic instances of *non-engagement* took place in EU external relations with both Belarus (missing framework agreement; preclusion of Minsk’s participation in bilateral track activities under ENP and EaP; non-inclusion of Belarus in EPC) and Azerbaijan (PCA’s pending upgrade to AA for nearly two decades now). In turn, *disengagement*, alongside extreme forms such as suspension of political formats or agreements (tacit acceptance of Belarus’ 2020 full suspension of participation in EaP), has been a companion of negative conditionality (resulting, thus, in financial – rather than political – downgrade, or remaining within discursive and rhetorical disengagement confines). The absence, until mid-2022, of a credible enlargement prospect for the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood had it that clear in/out – and thus dis/engagement – boundaries could not be simply drawn. Sanctions for corruption, democracy and human rights violations, for instance, while signalling risk of disengagement, have not prevented the EU in the past from engaging with the sanctioned states and their elites (from Belarus and Azerbaijan to Moldova, Ukraine and even the most-sanctioned Russia). Likewise, the so-called ‘principled pragmatism’, formally introduced with the 2016 EU Global Strategy, legitimized the Union’s engagement with non-democratic regimes in areas of mutual interest. Similarly, the EU’s 2016 Principles guiding relations with Russia, too, explicitly referred to ‘selective cooperation’ even with adversarial regimes on areas of common interest. Now, with the arrival of the enlargement agenda to the EU’s EN and the criticality of the ongoing struggle between democracy and autocracy on a global scale, *dissociation* and *distancing (isolation)* have enriched the repertoire of the EU’s estrangement relationality. Along with the exclusionist logic of EU distancing away from illiberal, authoritarian, criminal or pariah regimes (such as in Belarus or Russia), dissociation and disengagement have recently come to serve democratic deterrence logic, too, with sanctions, relations reversal/downgrading (e.g., late 2024 suspension of Georgia’s EU accession) or other punitive actions (e.g., filing or joining EU member states’ lawsuits against Belarus at ICJ and ICC), up to building paper (e.g., the risk of suspension of EU-Georgia visa-free travel regime) or physical walls (the recent construction of a wall on EU’s border with Belarus – to prevent further weaponization of migration and protect against other hybrid or conventional attacks) being no longer strangers to the European Union’s external action. Democratic hedging, or deterrence of de-democratization/autocratization within the EU’s EN, falls within the latter logic of dissociation and distancing as well.

In EU-Eastern neighbour relations, *estrangement* may, therefore, take many forms of othering from critical engagement to relational dissociation and downgrade, disengagement, distancing, and detachment – up to strategic non-engagement. In some way, estrangement can be regarded as a fallout of unsuccessful engagement, where othering and self-distancing seem to be the only options left. However, estrangement is not necessarily about ‘self-removal’ from a relationship – it is as much about confrontation as it is about evasion. In practice, alongside cooperative approach and various modes of EU engagement with the neighbours through political dialogue, bilateral agreements, and incentives, the EU’s democracy promotion – and especially democracy protection – also occurs within a confrontational approach that involves foreign aid or relationship suspension,

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<sup>189</sup> Kubicek, P. (2017). Dancing with the devil: explaining the European Union’s engagement with Ukraine under Viktor Yanukovych. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 25(2), 143-162.



sanctions, and naming and shaming<sup>190</sup>. *Shaming*, as a genuinely relational EU approach, is increasingly used in human rights pressure practice, which gave rise to a distinct kind of geopolitics – ‘geopolitics of shaming’<sup>191</sup>. A comparative Official Development Assistance-focused enquiry into the effects of *economic sanctions* and *foreign aid suspensions* reaffirmed the relative effectiveness of both, with the latter one wielding more positive effects<sup>192</sup>: the success rate of imposed aid suspensions was found to be 44% and that of economic sanctions – 26%<sup>193</sup>.

Then, varied forms of disengagement and distancing tend to produce volatile and both case- and context-varying outcomes.

On the one hand, they serve as means to pursue tailored signalling and implicature towards both a non-compliant government and its – expectedly – democracy-oriented population, as well as the international community more broadly. The EU’s relations with Belarus, especially post-2011, are a vivid illustration of disengagement and distancing practices, where EU-imposed non-participation of Minsk’s in bilateral arrangements under both ENP and EaP policy frameworks, conjoined with minimalist diplomatic relations and international isolation, have prompted the perceived ‘code of absence’ – that is, the lack of formal bilateral ties<sup>194</sup>.

On the other hand, the EU’s increasing disengagement, resolute dissociation and distancing from a de-democratizing/autocratizing neighbour might trigger counter-effects, especially in contexts of hard great-power competition with its zero-sum logic. In the EU-Russia neighbourhood, this is a salient dilemma for the Union as the risk or even a ‘threat of abandonment’ (whether through critical decrease in funding, or defection on providing financial lifeline or diplomatic shelter) might leave an in-between country entirely at Russia’s mercy. This concern is what most likely keeps the EU’s distancing from the autocratizing, post-2020s, Georgia far-but-close enough<sup>195</sup> – unlike, for instance, the EU’s dissociation with Azerbaijan (energy trading pragmatism notwithstanding) and Belarus<sup>196</sup>. Albeit progressing on its EU accession agenda, fears of EU abandonment remain in Ukraine due to

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<sup>190</sup> Ruiz Cairó, E., & Lonardo, L. (2023). The promotion of the rule of law in the EU neighbourhood: an impact assessment. In *Enhancing the Rule of Law in the European Union’s External Action*, ed. by L.M. Hinojosa-Martínez & C. Pérez-Bernárdez (pp.313-337). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

<sup>191</sup> Terman, R. (2023). *The Geopolitics of Shaming: When Human Rights Pressure Works — and When It Backfires*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

<sup>192</sup> *Foreign aid suspensions* seem to have more positive effects than economic sanctions, as a leverage tool, because: (1) aid suspensions are economically beneficial for the adopting state, while sanctions are costly, (2) aid suspensions directly affect the targeted government’s budget, (3) market forces undermine sanctions but not aid suspensions, and (4) aid suspensions are less likely to spark adverse behavioural reactions, see: Mertens, C. (2024). Carrots as Sticks: How Effective Are Foreign Aid Suspensions and Economic Sanctions? *International Studies Quarterly*, 68(2), sqae016.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> Miadzvetskaya, Yu. (2022). “Code of Absence”: EU-Belarus Legal Framework. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 27(2), 181–202.

<sup>195</sup> Hall, A. (2024). The West Will Regret Abandoning the Georgian People to the Clutches of Russia. *Byline Times*, 17.12.2024, <https://bylinetimes.com/2024/12/17/the-west-will-regret-abandoning-the-georgian-people-to-the-clutches-of-russia/>; Thornton, L. (2024). Georgia: The next domino to fall in the Kremlin’s undemocratic direction. *POLITICO*, 07.05.2024.

<sup>196</sup> In view of significant hybrid threats emanating from Russia-orchestrated ‘refugee’ crisis at the Belarus-EU border since 2021, the EU’s distancing from Belarus took on a new – radical – form as border-crossing points with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland got closed and *border walls* started being erected for the past few years. As Russian invasion of Ukraine continues and the war risks spreading through Belarus to the EU, the EU’s Baltic member states and Poland secured in autumn 2024 EU funding for building a ‘Baltic Defence Line’. Notably, as



both perplexed – for wartime – democratic development and compliance with the EU accession conditionality, the EU’s enlargement-reform challenges as well as growing war fatigue among select EU member states such as Hungary or Slovakia<sup>197</sup>. Fears of EU abandonment in Georgia are even graver – albeit, seemingly, among the Georgian populace alone. The GD government has long hoped for the persistence of the ‘business as usual’ approach in Brussels. The EU’s distancing and suspension of Georgia’s EU accession process seem to have countered the government’s calculations as GD’s ‘hope for business as usual with the West is proving futile’<sup>198</sup>.

Without exaggeration, the Russian all-out war on Ukraine changed everything in, and for, the region since 24 February 2022. Ontological security and existential anxiety have begotten the EU’s Eastern neighbours, fears of the Russian threat shook the Union’s ‘peace, stability and prosperity’ mantra as well. But most of all, beliefs in dividends of wartime democracy were shattered, whereas transaction and compensation logic entered foreign policy calculations of the EU’s many Eastern neighbours, triggering a sudden – albeit sporadic yet – turn to autocratization. With further authoritarian consolidation in ‘expected places’ like Belarus or Azerbaijan, episodic illiberal measures (not yet policies) are spotted in war-torn Ukraine and (both war-torn and post-war) Armenia, but also in persistently polarized and subjected to Russian hybrid attacks Moldova, as well as, last but not least, rampant autocratization is recorded in the before the 2020s ‘unexpected place’ – GD’s Georgia<sup>199</sup>. Georgia’s case of democratic breakdown and unwinding autocratization is illustrative and instructive like no other – it is also the key test for the EU’s newfound mission of democracy protection.

#### 4.3.1. EU-Georgia turnaround: from enlargement to estrangement – and back again?...

In 1999, speaking at the Council of Europe, Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania uttered ‘I am Georgian and therefore I am European’ and declared EU membership as Georgia’s foreign policy priority. Since the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia has pursued its ‘European dream’ and both widened and deepened its relations with the EU. Part of the EU’s all neighbourhood-directed policy frameworks and bilateral engagement initiatives, Georgia – at times competing for leadership with Moldova – made it to one of the EU’s ‘model students’ in democratization and Europeanization under both the ENP, the EaP, and the AA/DCFTA. It was among the first cohort of EU ENs to receive a visa-free travel regime in 2017, seen in Tbilisi as a significant achievement, symbolizing the EU’s acceptance of Georgia’s Europeanness – European identity and democratic standard – as such<sup>200</sup>. The 2018 amendments to the Georgian Constitution resulted in the adoption of Article 78 that mandates

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Belarus acted as an enabler of Russian full-scale invasion (and, thus, co-aggressor) in February 2022, Ukraine isolated itself from Belarus both physically and politically, see: Таїсія Єрохіна (2024) Ізоляція Білорусі: як ЄС та Україна відгороджуються від ненадійної сусідки. *RFI*, 16.08.2024, <https://www.rfi.fr/uk/міжнародні-новини/20240816-ізоляція-білорусі-як-єс-та-україна-відгороджуються-від-ненадійної-сусідки>

<sup>197</sup> Chaban, N., & Elgström, O. (2024). The threat of abandonment: Images of the EU’s crises in post-Maidan Ukraine. *European Journal of International Security*, 1-19.

<sup>198</sup> Sirbiladze, I. (2025). How To Help Georgia Out of Its Growing Democracy Crisis. *GMF Policy Brief*, June 2025, p.2.

<sup>199</sup> Anderson, S. (2025). How Georgia Went From the Vanguard of Democracy to the Front Lines of Autocracy. *The New York Times*, 20.08.2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/20/magazine/georgia-russia-autocracy-dictatorship.html>

<sup>200</sup> Loda, C. (2019). Georgia, the European Union, and the Visa-Free Travel Regime: Between European Identity and Strategic Pragmatism. *Nationalities Papers*, 47(1), 72–86.

all constitutional bodies to take all available measures in their competence to ensure Georgia's full integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures, the EU and NATO. Thus, even after the Georgian Dream (GD) party's arrival at power in 2012, the country kept its commitment to European integration and democratization at both constitutional, political and administrative levels. High progress in implementing the Association Agreement and thereby increasing convergence with the EU policies (save CFSP alignment) came to attest to Georgia's European drive. Traditionally, the Georgian population has been among the biggest enthusiasts of European integration, overwhelmingly supporting the country's pro-EU course at over 80% levels<sup>201</sup>.

Yet, the changing regional dynamics post-2014 (Russian hybrid warfare against Ukraine and the EU, growing great-power competition in the region, as well as the rise of populism and illiberalism), coupled with dominance-inducing domestic factors (GD's triple rise to power by winning three consecutive parliamentary elections in 2012, 2016, and 2020; capture of state institutions; public and political polarization) and the lasting perceived lack of a credible EU accession prospect, drove the reversal of Georgia's democratization and Europeanization course. Russian 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine only further catalyzed and intensified democratic regression and Georgia's transition from values-based rationale to 'transactional' foreign policy hedging in general<sup>202</sup>.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, thus, catalyzed not only geopolitical re-alignments across the region, including Georgia's, but also the posturing of domestic political forces and the shift in domestic politics – and so in spite of having rushed to apply on 3 March 2022 for EU membership. Initially, the GD's contestation of European/Western institutions and politics was rhetorical, amounting to 'discursive disengagement' only<sup>203</sup>. Since early 2023, however, this shift became more substantial and even structural, encompassing, along with the Kremlin narratives-echoing discourse, as well an avalanche of illiberal and openly non-democratic legislative changes that rewired Georgia's political and legal systems.

In June 2022, while positively opining on the EU candidate status award to Ukraine and Moldova, the European Commission reaffirmed only a 'European perspective' for Georgia, thereby setting twelve preconditions to be met. These twelve conditions revolved around: (1) addressing the issue of political polarization; (2) guaranteeing the full functioning of the state institutions; (3) adopting and implementing a transparent and effective judicial reform; (4) strengthening the anti-corruption policy; (5) implementing the commitment to 'de-oligarchization'; (6) strengthening the fight against the organized crime; (7) improving the independent media environment; (8) strengthening the protection of the human rights of vulnerable groups; (9) enhancing the gender equality and fight against violence against women; (10) ensuring the involvement of civil society in decision-making; (11)

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<sup>201</sup> See, e.g.: IRI (2017). Survey of Public Opinion in Georgia (February 22 – March 8, 2017), [https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/iri\\_poll\\_presentation\\_georgia\\_2017.03-general.pdf](https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/iri_poll_presentation_georgia_2017.03-general.pdf); IRI (2023). National Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Georgia (March 2023), <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-public-opinion-survey-of-residents-of-georgia-march-2023/>.

<sup>202</sup> Kakachia, K., Lebanidze, B., & Kakabadze, S. (2024). Transactional hedging versus value-based hedging: how small frontline states balance between European integration and Russian influence. *European Security*, 33(4), 594-614.

<sup>203</sup> Tsuladze, L., Abzianidze, N., Amashukeli, M., & Javakhishvili, L. (2024). De-Europeanization as discursive disengagement: has Georgia "got lost" on its way to European integration? *Journal of European Integration*, 46(3), 297-319.

implementing the standards of the European Court of Human Rights; and (12) ensuring the impartial nomination of the Public Defender<sup>204</sup>.

Expectedly, these were too encompassing and infeasible, also in view of the GD's charted detour from a pro-EU course<sup>205</sup>.

Yet, in December 2023, resorting to geostrategic and democratic hedging and thereby applying a candidate-favourable approach, the European Council granted Georgia an EU candidate status. By virtue of granting the status, with the twelve recommendations largely remaining unaddressed (and the EU's accession conditionality, thus, not quite met) and the GD, too, not expecting this, the EU made a pre-emptive geostrategic move, forcing Georgia to make a firm choice. As the GD has been growingly betting on balancing between Brussels and Moscow, the EU's unexpectedly extended offer of membership to Georgia put the country's elites in a difficult and dilemmatic situation, denying further pursuit of balancing. In view of the Russian expanding aggression in Ukraine, the ruling Georgian elites decided to turn against their people and sabotage their westward course, while simultaneously and incrementally re-aligning with the Russian regime's preferences.

From early 2024, the GD ruling party re-introduced the 'foreign agents' law and then over a dozen of other pieces of legislation that cemented the country's slide to illiberalism and authoritarianism<sup>206</sup>. Among others, the Kremlin-inspired copycat law on 'converting' NGOs and media outlets that receive over 20% of external funding into 'agents of foreign influence', with crippling fines and potential closure as possible consequences, ought to be mentioned. As it had proven to be less 'effective' in commanding obedience to the regime, a new 'Foreign Agents Registration Act' (FARA) law was passed in April 2025 that criminalizes individuals (and not just CSOs/NGOs) suspected by the authorities to be acting in the interest of foreign powers, with a very broad room for interpretation left as to what constitutes such a misconduct – and a very broad scope of sanction from fines to up to five years of imprisonment. Swiftly introduced repressive legislation has incrementally been used to neutralize dissent and outlaw the protests, marginalize the opposition and even further turn the judiciary into a political weapon.

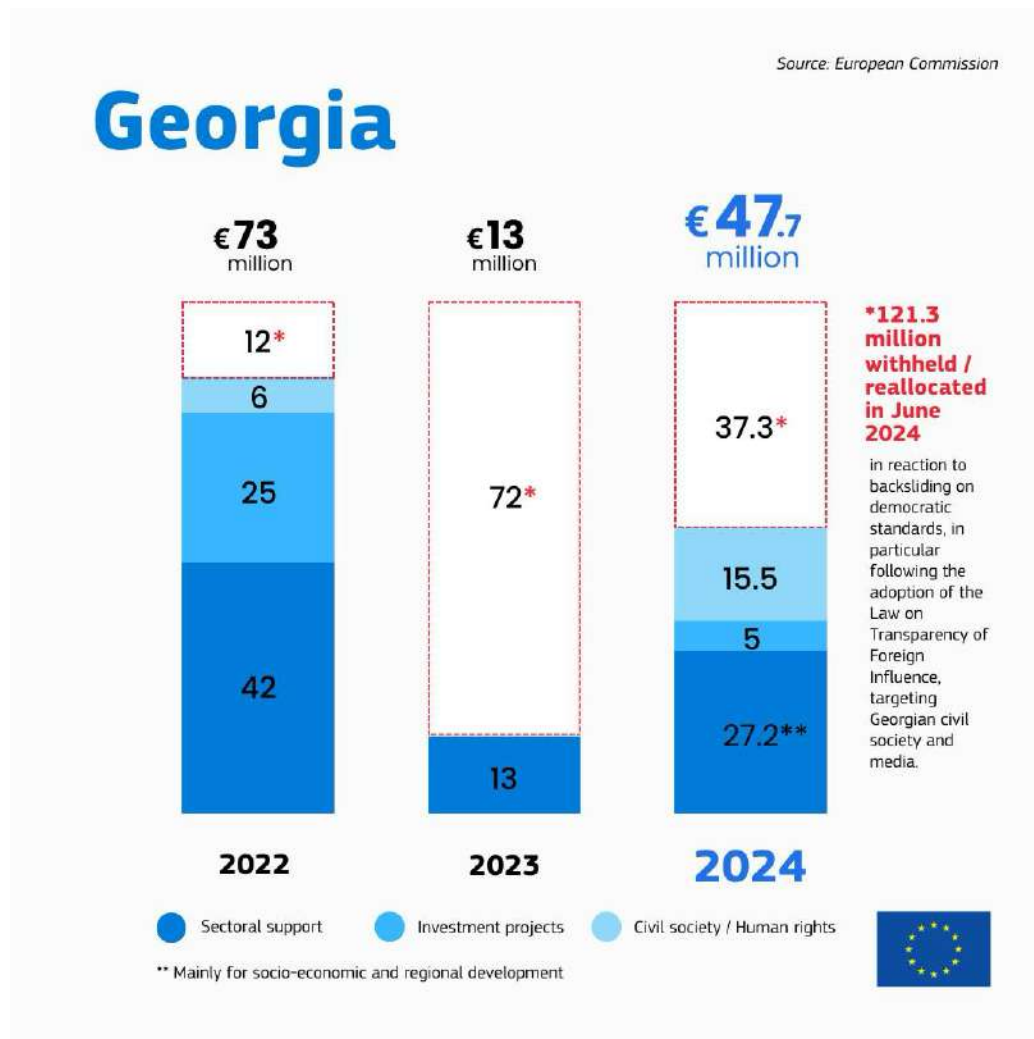
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<sup>204</sup> European Commission (2022). COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL Commission Opinion on Georgia's application for membership of the European Union, *Brussels*, 17.6.2022 COM(2022) 405 final, <https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-06/Georgia%20opinion%20and%20Annex.pdf>

<sup>205</sup> Davitashvili, G. (2022). The 'New Wave' of Eastern Enlargement: How Does the EU conditionality Work for Georgia? *GIP Policy Memo*, 61 (November 2022).

<sup>206</sup> OC Media (2025). The 16 legislative changes that have shaped Georgia's authoritarian slide. *OC Media*, 04.06.2025, <https://oc-media.org/explainer-the-16-legislative-changes-that-have-shaped-georgias-authoritarian-slide/>

Figure 9 EU's 2024-withheld/reallocated financial aid to Georgia



Source: European Commission (2024)<sup>207</sup>.

Moreover, in April 2024, the governing party, Georgian Dream, launched an all-out attack on Europe and the liberal West at large, first through the rhetoric about an arguable 'global war party' that forces Georgia to enter war with Russia and then through smear campaigns about 'Brussels dictatorship' and 'liberal fascism'<sup>208</sup>, thus effectively positioning the EU candidate state in opposition to what the EU and EU accession process are about – and so in spite the parallel rhetoric of Georgia's commitment to the Euro-Atlantic integration course. While having distanced itself from the growingly illiberal government in Tbilisi, the EU criticism of the non-democratic

<sup>207</sup> European Commission (2024). 2024 Financial Allocations: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia & Moldova, <https://eu4georgia.eu/financial-assistance-lost-as-a-result-of-democratic-backsliding/>

<sup>208</sup> Georgian PM vows to 'eradicate liberal fascism' amid crackdown on pro-EU protests. *France24*, 05.12.2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20241205-georgian-pm-vows-to-eradicate-opposition-amid-pro-eu-protests>

laws and measures adopted by GD, remained too timid, with resolute action, too, falling behind. It was not until early July 2024, when the EU's stance toughened up, as it formally suspended Georgia's accession process and froze further EUR 30 million in financial aid for the country's defence ministry, earlier earmarked under the European Peace Facility budget<sup>209</sup>. In total, and except for sectoral support (socio-economic and regional development projects), the EU withheld and reallocated in 2022-2024 over EUR 120 million of the earlier-earmarked financial aid for Georgia (Figure 9).

Effectively, since spring 2024, Georgia's EU accession process has been *de facto* halted domestically, due to the incompatible course of action taken by the Georgian government. The June 2024 European Council confirmed that Georgia's EU accession process *de facto* was at a standstill, urging the Georgian authorities to 'clarify their intentions by reversing the current course' and ensure 'free and fair elections' in the fall<sup>210</sup>.

However, the October 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia were highly manipulative through both the ruling party-favouring legislation (and procedural legal changes) and the massive hybrid influencing campaigns (including disinformation and information manipulations), both from within the ruling elites and outside the country. This has taken thousands of Georgians to the streets, and the protests won't cease for over half a year now – the largest pro-democracy protests since the 2003 Rose Revolution, in fact. The Georgian government's brutal suppression of protests following a disputed election has escalated into a full-blown crisis of democracy.

The European Commission's 2024 Enlargement Package report on Georgia, released shortly after the Georgian elections, on 30 October 2024, noted that the country 'has gone backwards' and urged to halt Georgia's EU accession<sup>211</sup>. The report officially stated that the process of Georgia's accession to the European Union has been suspended.

A few weeks after the largely fraudulent elections, the European Parliament called, in its resolution of 28 November 2024, for new elections in Georgia and recommended sanctions against leaders for democratic backsliding, electoral violations, abuse of state resources, as well as suppression of protests. That same day, in a 'pre-emptive' counter-move, Georgia's Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze seized the EP's resolution as a convenient pretext to *officially* halt Georgia's EU accession talks entirely and, what is more important, until 2028 so (albeit days after, on 1 December 2024, the Georgian authorities denounced such accession negotiations 'postponement' would imply suspension of Georgia's European integration<sup>212</sup>). This was a moment of formal rupture.

The EU's move towards estrangement vis-à-vis Georgia has had not only political or diplomatic consequences. In fact, the EU's and Western diplomatic pressure and political isolation of Georgia has inflicted palpable economic costs, as already in the third quarter of 2024 alone, FDI plummeted down by 55.2% vs the year 2023,

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<sup>209</sup> EU freezes 30 million euros in aid to Georgian army, *Reuters*, 09.07.2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-freezes-30-million-euros-aid-georgian-army-2024-07-09/>

<sup>210</sup> European Council (2024). Conclusions of the European Council meeting (27 June 2024), Brussels, 27 June 2024, EUCO 15/24, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/qa3lbgla/euco-conclusions-27062024-en.pdf>. Here p.10.

<sup>211</sup> European Commission (2024). Georgia 2024 Report, Brussels, 30.10.2024, SWD(2024) 697 final, [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/georgia-report-2024\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/georgia-report-2024_en)

<sup>212</sup> Martynyuk, L. (2024). Georgian government denies halting EU accession, even as it suspends talks. *VoA*, 04.12.2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/georgian-government-denies-halting-eu-accession-even-as-it-suspends-talks/7887363.html>

and increased the country's economic vulnerability more generally<sup>213</sup>. Georgia's security, too, has been compromised as the country's de-alignment from the Euro-Atlantic structures deprived it of what was earlier deemed as critical deterrent against Russia.

On 20 December 2024, the European Commission weighed a temporary and partial suspension of the visa-free regime for select Georgian political elite and public servants<sup>214</sup>. In January 2025, the EU suspended visa liberalization for Georgian diplomats and officials. In February 2025, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the deterioration of the political situation, calling for free and fair (re)elections, and the suspension of Georgia's EU candidate status. In autumn 2025, and especially following the negative assessment of the country's further democratic backsliding in the Commission's 2025 Enlargement Package, the Commission stated it considered Georgia as a candidate status by the name only, and the EU renewed the effort to set new visa suspension rules beyond 'temporary' and 'selective' suspensions.<sup>215</sup> Georgia's fifth president Salomé Zourabichvili argued against the possibility of the EU's full disengagement and isolationism vis-à-vis the backsliding – but still an EU accession – country, positing that 'Georgia is not lost' (yet) and that 'Europe cannot afford to lose Georgia', as Tbilisi's domestic struggles are not only about 'one nation's democratic future' – but 'a measure of the European project's resilience'<sup>216</sup>.

Critics demand, though, that the EU's response to Georgia's rampantly progressing democratic backsliding should entail a more 'working' combination of punitive, protective, and progressive measures, including targeted sanctions and suspension of active arrangements and agreements such as the Visa Liberalization regime or the AA/DCFTA<sup>217</sup>.

As spotted in other contexts, the EU's delayed response to the post-election crisis in Georgia is much criticized for having been 'too late, too little'. The EU's approach to Georgia's backsliding from democratic development to ever-expanding authoritarianism has so far centred around distancing and disengagement, in particular as regards the suspension of the country's EU candidacy status and the high-level dialogue with the ruling elite. Sanctions have rather remained minimal, albeit both domestically (both in Tbilisi and across European capitals) and internationally, the pressure is mounting for EU to apply targeted sanctions on the GD's key figures, including the informal leader (aka 'the oligarch', ie., B. Ivanishvili) and both judges and prosecutors complicit in repression, visa bans and asset freezes, a more determined isolation and non-recognition of the illegitimate government, as well as there are calls for providing stronger support for independent media and CSOs in Georgia. On the extreme side, the calls are also made for the EU to publicly declare that the country's EU integration path is closed until and unless there is a radical change back from dismantling to rebuilding democratic institutions. While commonly understood to be the indeed way out *and* ahead, such an estrangement ultimatum has not yet found

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<sup>213</sup> Bechná, Z, and Kakachia, K. (2025). The Costs of Georgia's Self-Isolation. *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 935, May 2025

<sup>214</sup> European Commission (2024). Commission proposes to suspend visa-free travel for officials from Georgia, Brussels, 20.12.2024, [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-proposes-suspend-visa-free-travel-officials-georgia-2024-12-20\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-proposes-suspend-visa-free-travel-officials-georgia-2024-12-20_en)

<sup>215</sup> Jozwiak, R. (2025). EU Edges Closer To New Visa Suspension Rules Amid Concerns Over Georgia. *RFE/RL*, 06.10.2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-new-visa-suspension-rules-concerns-georgia-russia/33551349.html>

<sup>216</sup> Zourabichvili, S. (2025). Georgia's democratic unravelling, Europe's strategic test. *Brussels Institute for Geopolitics (BIG Europe)*, 13.11.2025, <https://big-europe.eu/publications/2025-11-13-georgia-s-democratic-unravelling-europe-s-strategic-test>

<sup>217</sup> Ditrych, O. (2024). Trouble in Tbilisi: How the EU should respond to Georgia's drift towards authoritarianism. *EUISS Brief*, 20 (November 2024).

its way to the EU official discourse. Peculiarly, the EU keeps officially monitoring the developments in Georgia as part of the Enlargement Package reports.

Evidently, the EU's accession conditionality vis-à-vis Georgia – and an 'advance' EU membership promise-as-a-hedge in the first place – have not brought positive leverage, reverting Tbilisi's democratic backsliding. This has been a sudden and fast, if not the fastest, democratic collapse in contemporary Europe, which occurred due to both opportunistic domestic illiberalism in Tbilisi, the EU's half-hearted measures and the immense external pressures and non-democratic counter-force emanating from Russia. The war context also ought to be duly considered here: in times of high geopolitical uncertainty and unpredictability, instant gains and short-term hedging outweigh the accession conditionality's remote dividends. It is sensible to agree with Tocci<sup>218</sup> that the eventual survival of Georgia's democracy hinges not just on the country's domestic counter-forces or the EU's involvement alone – it depends much on the outcome of the Russian war on Ukraine and the state of democracy globally. After all, the EU faces a highly salient and double dilemma here: preventing Georgia from further democratic backsliding (de-democratization/autocratization) and sliding away from Europe in principle (de-Europeanization).

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<sup>218</sup> Tocci, N. (2024). Georgia is on the frontline of the struggle between Russia and the west. Will its democracy survive? *The Guardian*, 15.07.2024



## 5. CONCLUSION

The (hi)story of EU relations with its Eastern neighbours has always revolved around the two pillars, EU-style democratization and broader Europeanization of social, political and economic life in the countries of the Union's immediate vicinity. Democracy promotion has taken many forms, including direct democracy assistance and indirect leverage, as well as it has relied on varying EU-induced and co-constituted bilateral links and linkages. Yet the extent to which the level and depth of the relationship itself is consequential for the success or failure of democratic transformation, while inherently present, has not informed much of the scholarly debate. The expanded bandwidth of EU relationality vis-à-vis the Eastern neighbours post-2022 – now including enlargement and estrangement dimensions – invites reflection on, and reassessment of, the matter. It is exactly what this paper has pursued as its key analytical goal: to unpick the ways in which the EU's three key relationalities (engagement, enlargement and estrangement), with their distinct and shared toolkits, inform the process and outcomes of democratization (and thereby, counter-autocratization) across the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, including first and foremost the three EU-associated – and now also EU candidate – states (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).

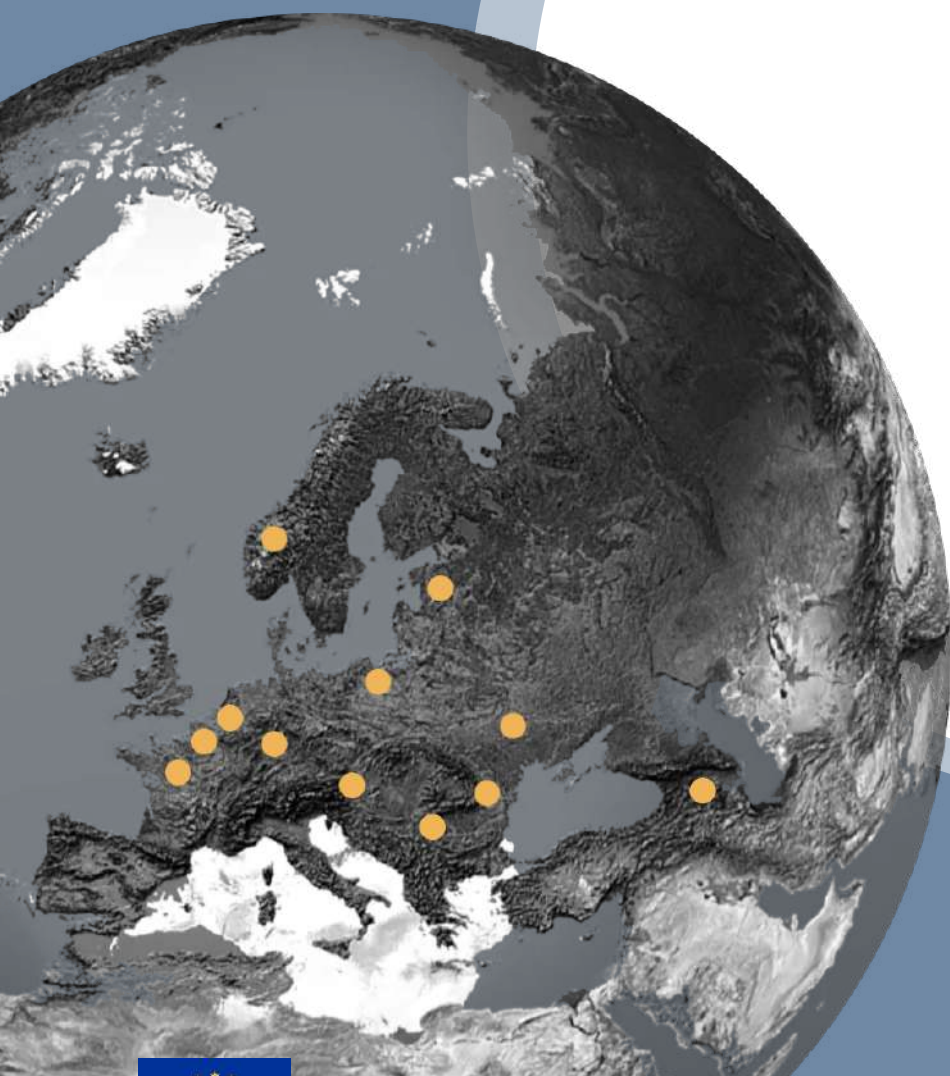
The analysis showed that, in spite of notable progress in building EU-style democracies and would-be member states in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the democratic course across the countries and within the region is both unsustainable and reversible (save perhaps Moldova's most recent 2024 and 2025 democratic wins), necessitating the prioritization of democratic stabilization and protection first. This defensive turn in EU democratization/counter-autocratization politics, while long in the making, has only crystallized in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Domestic temptations of transactionalism in foreign policy, overlain by the regional trends of cresting illiberalism, great-power competition as well as the global struggle between democracies and autocracies, make Europe's 'frontline democracies' prime targets for authoritarian offensives. The EU's shift to geostrategic enlargement towards the region helps mitigate some of the external illiberal pressure and hedge against democratic backsliding in wartime Eastern Europe. While this new relationality dimension proved to have, by and large, stabilized Ukraine's and Moldova's democracy building, the lack of credibility of the EU accession prospect, as well as too cautious enlargement conditionality pursued in the EU's relations with Georgia, among other factors, has failed to shield the country from illiberalism. Georgia's case of democratic breakdown and unwinding autocratization is illustrative and instructive like no other – it is also the key test for the EU's newfound mission of democracy protection.

## ABOUT REUNIR

REUNIR, a Horizon-funded project with 12 partners from across Europe, examines how the EU can strengthen its foreign and security toolboxes to bolster the resilience and transformation of (potential) candidate countries in a new age of international relations. REUNIR's foresight approach takes the fundamental uncertainty and openness of alternative futures seriously. Adding the effects of 'protean power' unleashed in unforeseen circumstances to a multi-disciplinary approach to the research of the EU's 'control power' in relations with strategic rivals, REUNIR empirically assesses

foreign threats to the military, socio-economic and democratic resilience of nine neighbouring countries, determines capability shortfalls, maps local perceptions of the EU's support and political perspectives inside the EU on neighbourhood relations. Outlining scenarios up to 2035, REUNIR offers evidence-based policy recommendations to mitigate malign foreign interference and contribute to strengthening the EU's external action.





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