REUNIR

BUILDING ROBUST AND INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACIES: EU POLICY OPTIONS FOR COUNTERING POLITICAL THREATS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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SUMMARY

EU accession Candidate Countries of the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood face, to varying degrees, hybrid threats in the form of political interference and cultural diplomacy from external actors like Russia and China. These threats include disinformation campaigns, interference in elections and support for political or separatist movements. Against these threats, Candidate Countries demonstrate varying and uneven resilience capacities.

Domestic resilience hinges crucially on the EU's contribution and conditionality. While the EU has a traditional set of tools and instruments to foster democratisation and Europeanisation, it has also developed a range of innovative tools in response to growing hybrid political threats. Nonetheless, the EU often struggles to navigate the increasingly uncertain and volatile regional environments of the Candidate Countries and to adapt to distinct local needs and conditions.

The EU needs to further tailor its approach to enhance Candidate Country resilience against political threats. To do so, it must:

- adjust its support to local needs;
- strengthen its presence and communication across diverse population groups and place greater emphasis on grassroots resilience;
- adopt a firmer stance on the adoption and respect of European norms and reforms to ensure sustainable democratisation.

1. CONTEXT

Escalating geopolitical tensions and democratic backsliding have created growing space for authoritarian alternatives to the European democratic model. In response, the EU has recognised the need to defend democracy not only at the ballot box but across all areas where its values are being challenged. In autumn 2025 for example the EU launched the European democracy shield, introducing "concrete measures to empower, protect, and promote strong and resilient democracies across the EU". These efforts also extend to Candidate Countries (CC) in the Western Balkans (WB) and Eastern Neighbourhood (EN), where the EU has sought to engage in democracy promotion strategies. The domestic and regional environment of the nine WB and EN CCs however remains uncertain, while the source and nature of hybrid threats continue to rapidly evolve. EU support and contribution to democracy promotion therefore needs to adapt to regional and country-specific dynamics if CC democratic paths towards the EU are to be consolidated.

1.1. Background

1.1.1. Threats

Though exposed to varying degrees, CCs all face hybrid threats in the form of both political interference and cultural diplomacy from third-state actors. These include destabilising instruments such as disinformation campaigns, interference in electoral processes and support for secessionist and anti-EU political groups. Cultural diplomacy instruments grounded in fostering religious and cultural closeness are also used to promote discourses and values at odds with European integration. While all CCs are subject to such hybrid threats, their likelihood and impact diverge.

In the EN, Russia remains the most prominent hostile actor, obstructing democratisation and undermining EU integration efforts through deliberate destabilisation strategies. These include political interference and the use of cultural and religious ties to weaken societal consensus around European integration. China is a potential destabilising actor over the long-term, as its promotion of an authoritarian alternative to the European democratic model may have cumulative effects when combined with Russian disinformation and influence operations. In addition to Russia, Azerbaijan and Belarus have also emerged as promoters and enablers of authoritarianism in the region. This particularly concerns Georgia, already confronted with a shift towards authoritarianism.

In the WB, Russia also stands as the main malign destabilising actor through its usual tools of political interference and cultural diplomacy, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. Russian disinformation is also relayed and exacerbated by local media, primarily Serb media – in Serbia but also in other WB countries (e.g., North Macedonia). As in the EN, China's growing influence in the region – through the development of political, cultural, and academic ties and the promotion of its governance model, particularly in Serbia – could contribute to eroding support for democratic reforms and European integration over the long-term.

In the WB, Turkey and certain Gulf states have also emerged as significant actors in shaping political and cultural dynamics, particularly within Muslim populations. These activities, while not directly destabilising, can create political uncertainties and complicate alignment with the EU's democratic principles.

Finally, the US has also become a new destabilising and potentially threatening factor for several CCs in the EN and the WB. President Trump's unpredictable policies have created further uncertainty, while there have been signs of US political interference in the region (e.g. the Albanian elections of May 2025). President Trump offers both a pretext and a model of political and economic corruption for would-be strongmen.

1.1.2. Resilience

An analysis of legislative frameworks, political strategies and other institutional mechanisms, as well as third party surveys, reveals that democratic resilience is uneven among CCs. Legislative frameworks are often insufficiently developed or adapted to combat disinformation and ensure transparency in a fluid environment of hybrid threats. An overconcentration of ownership, low media literacy and public distrust in institutions further undermine resilience to political interference. Finally, a lack of social trust beyond the familial circle, acute ethnic divisions, and a strong reliance on informal and clientelist networks also expose CCs to cultural diplomacy instruments.

Given the growing trend of power concentration in the WB and rapid authoritarian consolidation in Georgia, there is also a risk of legislative and institutional frameworks being used to restrict rather than protect democratic freedoms, and for third-state actors to be instrumentalised rather than combated.

The most critical cases are Serbia and Georgia, which are already highly exposed to hybrid threats. Both countries present severe features of state capture and ideological alignment with external actors at the state level, further undermining their democratic resilience. Another case of particular concern is Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the secessionist threat has recently escalated. Mechanisms in place to maintain control have proved ineffective, while efforts to counter strong disinformation have also fallen short.

Some CCs have nonetheless developed enhanced resilience capacities. This is particularly evident in Ukraine, which has demonstrated strong cohesion and success in reducing malign interference from Russia, prompted by the latter's aggression – at least in the non-occupied territories. Moldova has also shown increased resilience capacities, as illustrated by the latest elections in October 2025, during which efforts to combat high levels of Russian interference were successful.

Civil society organisations have played an increasingly crucial role in building enhanced democratic resilience. In Moldova, for instance, they have been at the forefront of fact-checking and media literacy initiatives. Combined with EU cooperation and support – including the launch of a large-scale information campaign on EU integration in partnership with local NGOs –Russian disinformation during the country's last elections was relatively well countered[1]. This underlines that domestic resilience hinges on EU engagement, which needs to be further directed towards supporting and strengthening civil society initiatives and capacities.

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[1] See Groza, I. (2025), *Moldova's New Beginning: Lessons from Russia's Hybrid Interference and a Test for Democratic Resilience*, REUNIR.

2. CURRENT EU POLICIES

EU support and contribution to democratic resilience revolve around traditional tools, as well as innovative ones developed in response to the changing threat landscape. As part of its traditional approach, the EU monitors, evaluates and encourages domestic reforms through conditionality mechanisms. These include the opening and closing of accession chapters tied to democratic reforms, as well as through rule of law reports and peer review missions that monitor democratic progress and provide the basis for EU recommendations.

EU assistance is also based on the transfer of know-how to foster capacity-building in key democratic institutions through twinning projects, as well as on financial assistance (further discussed in D4.3). From a less technical point of view, EU action also goes through normative pressure and guidance within diplomatic political dialogues, but also cultural ones, to foster socialisation into European norms. The EU also has rapid-response tools to deal with political crises that severely threaten democracy, such as targeted sanctions and diplomatic and rule of law missions as well as the suspension or recalibration of financial assistance. In October 2025 the [mechanism](#) for suspending the visa-free regime was made more flexible, allowing for gradual sanctions in light of current developments, primarily in Georgia. Beyond managing short-term risks, the EU also seeks to re-establish more solid democratic foundations, prioritising anti-corruption frameworks, an independent judiciary and independent oversight mechanisms to reduce risks of state capture and external leverage over institutions.

In light of growing hybrid threats in the CCs, the EU has also developed new tools and strategies to combat foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), acknowledging the importance of public perceptions and strategic communication. This includes enhanced support for independent media, digital literacy and election scrutiny, in which EU delegations in CCs play a crucial role, assisted by EEAS StratCom Task Forces. To better counter political interference, the EU also supports local oversight and regulatory bodies as well as local civil society, and promotes reforms and best practices aligned with European standards. However, the EU's toolbox remains predominantly reactive, and engagement tends to be limited to certain segments of society.

Finally, the EU coordinates its action with other international organisations (e.g., the Council of Europe, OSCE, UNDP) to foster democratic resilience in a comprehensive manner. It also encourages cross-border coordination through regional platforms to create synergies, such as the annual disinformation forum in the framework of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, or the EU-Western Balkans Media Days platform.

In sum, the EU relies on both traditional and new instruments to foster resilience-building against hybrid political threats in the WB and EN, targeting national authorities as well as civil society and grassroots organisations. EU assistance and political backing are crucial for strengthening democratic institutions and implementing concrete measures, such as debunking disinformation. However, the EU does not yet offer a comprehensive approach to resilience – one that goes beyond institutional reforms and technical, concrete measures to genuinely encompass societal resilience. This approach is not sufficiently inclusive as it prioritises traditional EU interlocutors (domestic institutions, large CSOs) and does not address grassroots needs.

While the EU has progressively expanded its cooperation and reach to more diverse domestic actors, its approach to resilience-building remains insufficiently anchored in, and adaptable to, local specificities – an essential condition for building cohesive and inclusive democratic resilience.

3. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The EU must therefore further tailor its support to domestic specificities and needs. This means adapting its toolbox to local political contexts and reaching all segments of society in each CC, to enhance sustainable democratic resilience and foster an inclusive European integration process.
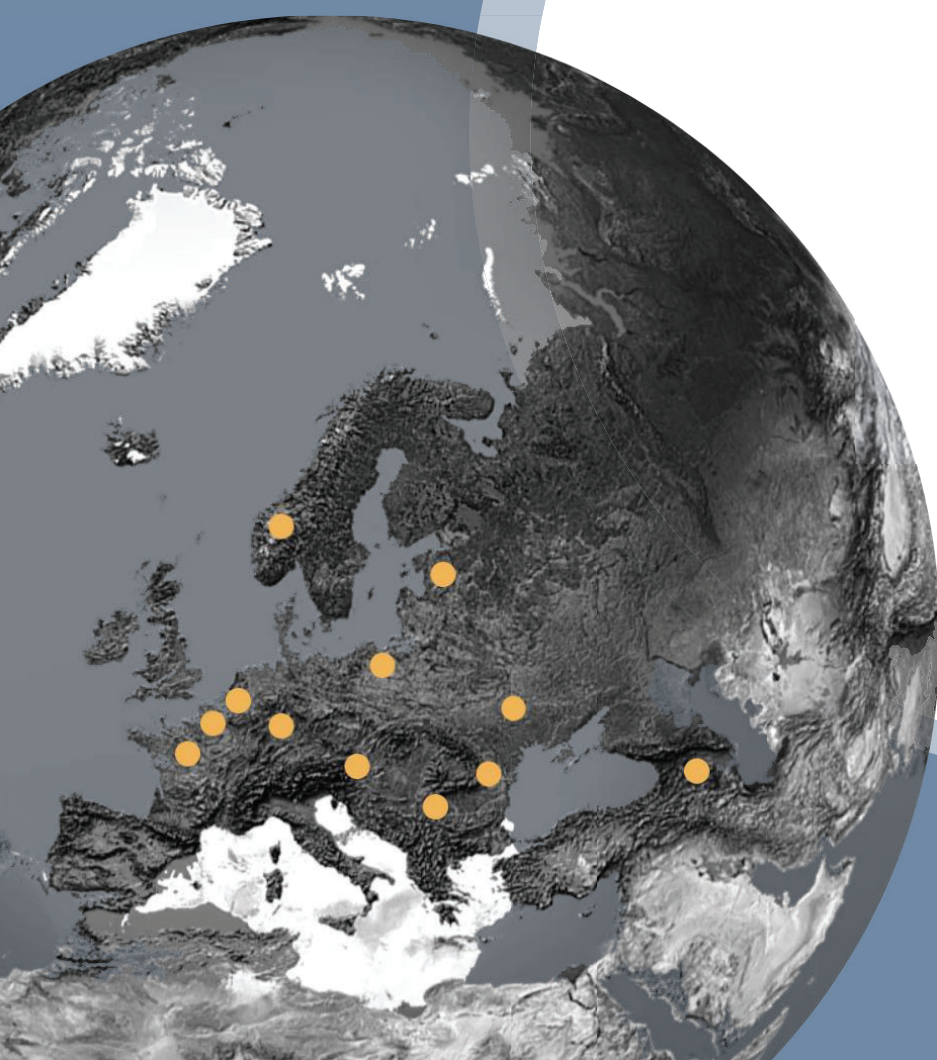
- In the short-term, it must bring additional and tailor-made support to CCs to strengthen legal and institutional frameworks, empower oversight mechanisms, and increase transparency. This will foster higher resilience capacities against political interference. In those countries where resilience is low (e.g., Serbia), the EU should consider enforcing strict conditionality and deploying monitoring commissions to go beyond formal democracy and foster deep democracy. Sanctions should also be adopted against oligarchic networks and enablers of state capture involved in corruption and serious human rights abuses (notably in Georgia and Serbia). For this to be efficient, the EU should develop mechanisms to adopt stricter measures without facing obstruction from Member States. In the medium-term, the EU must also prioritise anticipation and prevention in fighting hybrid political threats, first and foremost through enhancing situational awareness.

- The EU should make its communication more direct, targeted, strategic, and consistent. While emphasis is placed on debunking fake news and diffusing EU narratives, communication needs to be tailored to local contexts and take account of specificities. Extensive engagement with local stakeholders in co-drafting messages is also critical to address local concerns and build trust and partnership. Particular emphasis should be placed on engaging youth, as well as religious leaders and local administrations. When it comes to communication tools, the EU needs to enhance its presence on social media platforms widely used by external actors, primarily Russia, such as TikTok and Telegram. Non-digital tools of communication are still important however to reach marginalised communities that are not present on these platforms. In sum, having acknowledged the importance of public perception, EU strategic communication needs to reach all segments of society, and clearly convey the benefits of European integration and the results of EU programmes and reforms.

- Over the long-term, EU action should foster trust through inclusive processes and by addressing minority issues. This is critical considering that social trust is low in most CCs, and that EU support perceived as primarily elite-driven risks alienating rural and vulnerable groups. Furthermore, civil society plays an increasingly crucial role in enhancing democratic resilience. This should be acknowledged, and the EU should be working to cultivate grassroots resilience (e.g., solidarity, dissent, ethical citizenship) through taking account of specific domestic conditions and needs. Focus should be on protecting the civic space, empowering grassroots initiatives, and funding media and civic education. This entails going beyond capital-based civil society organisations and identifying grassroots associations as additional partners. One way of achieving this would be to relax bureaucratic requirements and move beyond project-driven support – such as through an extended use of core funding. Supporting local projects with quick and visible impacts for communities demonstrates the immediate and tangible benefits of European integration and will foster greater

trust on the ground. Paying particular attention to youth within these grassroots initiatives is also critical.

- The EU should reinforce its engagement with public authorities at both central and local levels. Local public authorities (LPAs) in particular are in direct and continuous contact with citizens and can play a decisive role in building trust, countering disinformation, and translating the benefits of European integration into tangible outcomes at the community level. The EU should therefore enhance capacity-building programmes for LPAs by supporting administrative reforms, boosting communication skills, and encouraging participatory governance mechanisms that promote transparency and citizen engagement. In parallel, the EU should intensify its engagement with political parties that are not currently in power, including opposition and extra-parliamentary actors. These parties often face limited access to resources, media visibility, and institutional dialogue, which can weaken the overall resilience of the democratic system. By supporting their organisational development, policy expertise, and communication capacities, the EU can help ensure a more balanced and competitive political environment. Strengthening credible and programmatic pro-EU alternatives outside government is essential to preventing political monopolisation and ensuring the continuity of the European agenda across electoral cycles. This inclusive approach to civil society should be sustained and integrated into the new EU Civil Society Strategy and the forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework. Support for civil society is even more critical in contexts of power concentration and shrinking civic space. In these contexts, the EU should also be prepared to face an exodus of civil society organisations and academia. The EU needs to pay particular attention to local dynamics in the CCs and tailor its support accordingly, at the institutional and state levels, but also and most importantly at the grassroots. It should also take account of and encourage those states that have been investing greater efforts in moving closer to the EU and are potentially preparing the ground for a future membership application. This is notably the case of Armenia, which should also be better supported in its growing European aspirations.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Against a backdrop of increasing state capture and third-state actors promoting alternative models of governance, it is critical that the EU refines its approach and adapts to fluid and rapidly evolving environments within the CCs. This will help to foster strong and sustainable democratic resilience. At a time when fractures and distrust are being exploited by malign actors, the EU must work towards greater cohesion and shared consensus with CC societies around the European project, to keep the European path solid and credible.