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ARI Centre pour une initiative Arabe de Réforme (ARI)	France (FR)
concentris research management GmbH (concentris)	Germany (DE)
Elliniko Idryma Evropaikis kai Exoterikis Politikis (Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy) (ELIAMEP)	Greece (EL)
Ilia State University (ILIAUNI)	Georgia (GE)
PalThink for Strategic Studies (PalThink)	Palestine
Stockholms Universitet (SU)	Sweden (SE)
Ukrainska Asociaciya Evropeyskih Studiy (UESA)	Ukraine (UA)
Universidad de Lleida (UdL)	Spain (ES)
Universiteit Gent (UGent)	Belgium (BE)
Universiteit Maastricht (UM)	Netherlands (NL)

University of Manchester (UMAN)	United Kingdom (UK)
Univerzitet u Beogradu – Fakultet Politickih Nauka (FPN)	Serbia (RS)

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Executive Summary

The empirical analysis in EMBRACE are guided by three main research questions: (1) What are the blockages to democratisation that EUDP needs to account for? (2) How and under what conditions can the blockages to democratisation be overcome and how can EUDP contribute to creating conditions that are conducive to this process? (3) Given the blockages to democratisation, how can the EU better adjust EUDP to reflect partner and context sensitivity and increase its effectiveness? (Introduction)

The European Neighbourhood is characterised by crises and conflicts, de-democratisation and autocratisation. The European Union's Democracy Promotion (EUDP) policy needs to account for these challenges. With EUDP, the EU seeks to support conditions that are conducive for democratization within partner countries (Section 2).

When promoting democracy abroad and towards the neighbourhood, the EU refers to a rights-based understanding of democracy that is in line with the multidimensional analytical concept of "embedded democracy" (Section 3).

To explain mixed results of EUDP, behavioural, institutional and structural blockages need to be taken into account. Specific constellations of these factors explain political closing. If not managed well, behavioural, institutional and structural blockages negatively influence the outcomes of political decision-making and lead to stalled political processes. Blockages are not necessarily naturally given; at times they are constructed and exploited by political actors. Some actors may actively seek to counter them, while others may be interested in perpetuating blockages for individual or collective profit (Section 4).

A substantial set of behavioural, institutional, and structural blockages need to be overcome to generate political opening (Section 5). Due to the scope of required tasks and the existence of potential blockages, minor political change is more likely than substantial political change and substantial political change is more likely than regime change. Most likely is the outcome of blurred democratisation, where reforms in some policy areas or dimensions of democracy are implemented while others clearly lack behind (Section 6).

Political contexts influence to what extent blockages can be overcome. Small-scale democratic gains can occur as a result of the reconfigurations that popular uprisings produce; and, conversely, blockages to such small-scale gains during moments of uprising or their aftermath can be created (Section 7). In authoritarian and hybrid regimes, the dominant, hegemonic elites block democracy and democratic will-formation, including through active attempt to prevent, suppress or eliminate contesting actors (Section 8). After conflict and revolution, blockages to peace might emerge at the intersection of peacebuilding and democratization (Section 9). Furthermore, EUDP is challenged by powerful and authoritarian geopolitical rivals (Section 10).

Gender and culture are two issues to be studied as cross-cutting, relevant in all fields of study (Section 11). Finally, guiding hypotheses are formulated (Section 12).

1   Introduction

Since the colour revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus, and the Arab Spring in MENA, very few countries in the neighbourhood have made progress in democratisation. Most of the countries, on the contrary, are currently characterised by opposite trends, i.e., namely de-democratisation and autocratisation. Out of the 23 neighbours, Freedom House (2021) classifies only two, namely, Israel and Tunisia, as "free" countries. Twelve neighbours are classified as "partly free" (i.e., Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Lebanon, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine) and nine are classified as "not free" (i.e., Algeria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey). Libya, Syria and Ukraine are affected by war. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, and Moldova, suffer from low-intensity or frozen conflicts over political order, territory or identity.

These countries differ significantly in terms of everyday political contention, governance processes, socio-economic development, legacies of violent conflict, geographic location, cultural values and beliefs, which characterise their societies, and prospects of EU membership. However, they have one feature in common: the persistence of blockages to democratisation. These blockages prevent democratisation at the domestic level, preclude further approximation to the EU and negatively affect stability, peace and security in the European neighbourhood. EMBRACE analyses the blockages to democratisation to shed analytical light on these developments and to explain processes of de-democratisation. But EMBRACE's analysis does not stop there. It is also interested in investigating and explaining democratic openings, meaning political change (even at small scale level) that increases the quality of democracy in the Union's neighbouring countries.

The ambition of EMBRACE is to provide a comprehensive analysis of both blockages and democratic openings and by doing so to support the European Union's democracy promotion in the neighbourhood (and beyond). For this endeavour, the empirical analysis in EMBRACE focuses on episodes of political closure and episodes of opening in the period from 2000 to 2023, where the persistence of blockages and the ways to overcome them can exemplarily be studied and compared. Episodes of closure allow EMBRACE to study the persistence of blockages. Episodes of opening allow EMBRACE to study the overcoming of blockages.

The present *Theory Framework Paper* (D2.2, delivered in month 8 of the project and revised after the periodic review in M18 of the project) informs the reader about the theoretical framework that the EMBRACE consortium employs to study political closure and democratic openings in the European Neighbourhood in several sub-fields of study. It is argued that political closure can be explained through constellations of behavioural, institutional and structural blockages that are both endogenous and exogenous to domestic political systems while democratic opening requires shifts within the constellations of the identified blockages.

The *Theory Framework Paper* lays the foundations for identifying and explaining the constellations of blockages to democratisation that the European Union's Democracy

Promotion (EUDP) policy needs to account for. On this theoretical ground, WP3 empirically investigates effects of EUDP on levels of democracy quantitatively while accounting for blockages to democratisation. The thematic WPs 4-7 identify and investigate various constellations of blockages in the five sub-regions qualitatively.

Likewise, the *Theory Framework Paper* conceptualises the episodes of democratic opening and their explanatory factors, including relevant actor constellations and structural factors conducive to political change. Based on sub-studies in all thematic WPs 4-7, EMBRACE will empirically identify and compare the drivers of change that enable blockages to democratisation to be overcome.

This analysis allows drawing of conclusions and recommendations to be combined within *WP8* on how the **European Union's Democracy Promotion (EUDP)** can be better positioned to increase its democratizing leverage and to support the development of a situation in its neighbouring countries that is more conducive to democratisation.

The theoretical framework presented in the *Theory Framework Paper* at hand is grounded in actors-, institutions-, and structures-oriented approaches to the explanation of political change, and considers theoretical accounts of European integration, democratisation and transition theory, recent research in the fields of peace- and statebuilding, studies on international democracy promotion and support, social movement studies, gender studies, area studies, as well as comparative autocracy and international relations research. Its considerations build the ground for three bundles of research questions (*Box 1*): the first bundle of research questions focuses on the blockages to democratisation that EUDP needs to account for, the second bundle of research questions sheds light on democratic openings and the third bundle of research questions helps to derive policy recommendations for a more context- and partner-sensitive EUDP (see also EMBRACE's Grant Agreement). The research questions guide all research in EMBRACE and will allow the consortium to synthesize all findings across all work packages.

Box 1. EMBRACE's research questions

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1. **What are the blockages to democratisation that EUDP needs to account for?**
   a. What are the EU-internal blockages that negatively influence EUDP (*WP2)*?
   b. What are the specific patterns of behavioural, institutional and/or structural blockages that emerge in defective democracies (*WP4*), in authoritarian and hybrid regimes (*WP5*) and in post-conflict consociational regimes (*WP6)*?
   c. What are the specific patterns of blockages to EUDP that emerge in the geopolitical and geo-economic competition between major powers (at national, regional or global level) who are rivals of EUDP (*WP7*)?
   d. How do blockages influence the effectiveness of EUDP? In which patterns of blockages is EUDP more, or less, effective (*WP3*)?

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2. **How and under what conditions can the blockages to democratisation be overcome and how can EUDP contribute to creating conditions that are conducive to this process?**
    a. How and under what conditions can the EU make use of the variety of EUDP instruments to increase its leverage on resilient authoritarian incumbents and to support pro-democratic actors to advance democratisation (*WPs 3-6*)?
    b. How and under what conditions can the EU complement its top-down approach to DP with a meaningful bottom-up approach to overcome blockages (WPs 3-6 and 8)?
    c. How and under what conditions can EUDP integrate local perspectives on democracy from various stakeholders (including women, youth and ethnic minorities) and adjust its "liberal democracy" concept to less contested forms of democracy (*WPs 3-6 and 8*)?
    d. How can EUDP countervail anti-democratic (domestic and/or geopolitical) alliances (*WP7)*?

3. **Given the blockages to democratisation, how can the EU better adjust EUDP to reflect partner and context sensitivity and increase its effectiveness?**
    a. What are the lessons to be learned for EUDP on the emergence of blockages to democratisation and its effects on levels of democracy (*WPs 2-8*)?
    b. How can the EU combine the variety of existing EUDP instruments more effectively (*WPs 2-8*)?
    c. What tools can EMBRACE suggest to the EU in order to contribute to more effective partner- and context-sensitive EUDP (*WP8*)?

Source: EMBRACE Grant Agreement.

The *Theory Framework Paper* has been prepared by Sonja Grimm (UKON/JMU) with contributions from the entire EMBRACE research consortium. It has been revised after the first periodic review in light of the reviewers' comments. It builds on a series of three background reports that have been prepared by UKON as part of *WP2* (Tasks 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4) as well as literature reviews prepared by the research teams contributing to *WPs 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7* (Tasks 4.1, 5.1, 6.1 and 7.1) and by the research teams working on the *cross-cutting issues of culture* (Task 2.10) and *gender* (Task 2.7, 9.4). *Background Report A* informs about the aims, ambitions, and instruments of EUDP. *Background Report B* conceptualises the episodes of closure and their explanatory factors including blockages. *Background Report C* sheds new light on the episodes of opening and those factors that are conducive to it (*The Background Reports are available from UKON upon request*). All these papers have been intensively discussed by the consortium and commented by members of EMBRACE's Academic and Policy Advisory Board (APAB) and the Ethics Advisory Board (EAB) during the Methodology Workshop at the University of Konstanz (26-28 April 2023). The main lines of argumentation have been compiled in this *Theory Framework Paper* at hand. *Please kindly note: The work in EMBRACE is in progress and will be subject to further revisions in light of the empirical findings*

from large- and middle-n research as planned in months 9-24 of the project. All remining errors are the main author's alone.

The report is structured as follows:

Sections 2-6 synthesise the overall theory framework as developed in *WP2 Theory, Methodology, Ethics* and in *WP3 Assessing EUDP Quantitatively*. More specifically, Section 2 presents the current state of democracy at world stage, its crisis and the rise of autocracy in order to define and describe the phenomenon of "de-democratisation" and "autocratisation". Section 3 introduces the reader to EMBRACE's concept of democracy, democracy promotion and the blockages to democratisation. Section 4 suggests an analytical model for the study of behavioural, institutional and structural blockages to democratisation contributing to political closure or deadlock. Section 5 informs about the concept of democratic opening, and Section 6 typologises the factors conducive to democratic opening.

Sections 7-10 introduce the reader into the fine-grained theory frameworks employed in the thematic WPs, namely, *WP4 Configurations for Democratic Policy Shifts after Popular Uprisings*, *WP5 Democratisation and Economic Modernisation in Authoritarian and Hybrid Regimes*, *WP6 Blockages to Democratisation and Peace* and *WP7 The Geopolitics of EUDP*.

Section 11 sheds light in the two *Cross-cutting Issues* studied in EMBRACE that are *Gender* and *Culture in Action*. Section 12 summarises EMBRACE's overarching hypotheses that will be empirically investigated in the remainder of the EMBRACE project and guide the synthesising of all empirical findings.

The *Theory Framework Paper* is completed by a glossary of terms and keywords used in EMBRACE and the list of references.

2   The crisis of democracy and the rise of autocracy

The starting point of EMBRACE's analysis is the empirical observation that de-democratisation and autocratisation have accelerated in the European Neighbourhood (and in the world at large) in the last two decades, despite intensive efforts of international and regional organisations (among them the EU), states and their agencies (among them the EU member states), and countless non-governmental organisations (among them many that are located on EU grounds) to globally promote and protect democracy. The crisis of democracy (Graber, Levinson, and Tushnet 2018; Merkel and Kneip 2018; Przeworski 2019, among others) on the one hand and the global rise of authoritarianism on the other (Carothers 2006; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Szent-Inányi and Kugiel 2020; Schäfer 2021) has made a substantial negative impact on democratisation and with it on international democracy promotion (Grimm 2015; Babayan and Risse 2017; Dodsworth and Cheeseman 2018; Hyde 2020). Hyde (2020, 1192) argues that "international norms and Western support for democracy have declined more in the past 4 years than in the prior 40".

When studying the phenomenon of democratic decline (erosion or decay) that effects the donors and recipients of democracy promotion in equal measure, terms such as "il-liberalisation" (Alizada et al. 2021), "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo 2016; Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg 2017; Waldner and Lust 2018; Eisen et al. 2019; Pérez-Liñán, Schmidt, and Vairo 2019; Hyde 2020), "democratic regression" (Tomini and Wagemann 2018; Diamond 2021; Gerschewski 2021; Croissant and Haynes 2022) or "de-democratisation" (Bogaards 2018; Martí I Puig and Serra 2020) are employed. Terms such as "the rise of (competitive) authoritarianism" (Bunce and Wolchik 2010; Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010) or "autocratisation" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Skaaning 2020; Alizada et al. 2021; Hellmeier et al. 2021) focus on the simultaneous rise and resilience of autocracy and authoritarianism.

All terms are – more or less – used synonymously in the debate, although their proponents start from different political regimes (democracies, autocracies and hybrid regimes hoovering somehow in between), highlight different theoretically relevant aspects (such as process vs. status) and focus on different bundles of factors (such as responsible actors, effected institutions and the influence of long-term changing structures, or short-term crisis situations) to describe and explain the phenomenon. As a common minimal denominator, scholars observe a loss of democratic quality at global scale including the world of consolidated democracies. In the following, the most valuable and theoretically most insightful accounts are summarised and compared to lead the reader to EMBRACE's understanding of de-democratisation and autocratisation as subject of study, which needs to be tackled by EUDP in its neighbourhood policies and beyond.

Hyde (2020, 1192) defines "democratic backsliding" as "incremental changes away from representative democracy and toward authoritarianism". Bermeo (2016, 5) denotes democratic backsliding as "the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy" and differentiates six varieties: (1) "open-

ended coups d'état" of the Cold War years that have been replaced by (2) "promissory coups", (3) "executive coups" that have been replaced by (4) "executive aggrandizement", (5) "election-day vote fraud", and the nowadays most frequently observed longer-term (6) "strategic harassment and manipulation" (Bermeo 2016, 6). She continues to argue that backsliding varies in speed and scope and results in different ends: Rapid and radical backsliding across a broad range of institutions can lead to outright democratic breakdown and fully authoritarian regimes; gradual backsliding across a more circumscribed set of institutions more likely yields to political systems that are ambiguously democratic or hybrid. The more fluid and ill-defined an institutional change is, the more difficult it becomes to take action to defend democracy in case of democratic backsliding, Bermeo (2016, 6) concludes.

Gerschewski (2021, 43) broadly portrays "democratic regression" as an overall loss of democratic quality that likewise effects young democracies, old democracies and countries in transition. Referring to the same term, Diamond (2021, 25-26) identifies three trends to describe this loss which has taken place since the peak of global democratisation in 2006: first, the stop of democracy's expansion; second, the recession of freedom in the world; and third, the acceleration of the rate of democratic breakdown. This includes, as Diamond (2021, 26) argues, the failure of democracy in a number of strategically significant states, such as Bangladesh, Thailand, Turkey, the Philippines, and in EU member state Hungary, and the signification deterioration of democracy in countries such as the United States, India, Indonesia, Brazil and in EU member state Poland. As the agents of destruction, Diamond (2021, 30) identifies the "elected political leaders, greedy for power and wealth, who knock away various types of constraints on their power and enlarge and entrench it in undemocratic ways". Hence, democratic regression is incrementally implemented under a legal façade by illiberal political parties and leaders that have come to power in relatively democratic electoral processes. Such movements are often supported by "rural communities outside national capitals and metropolitan areas and from segments of society that feel left behind by out-of-touch elites" (Eisen et al. 2019, 9).

The V-Dem Institute team prefers the term of "autocratisation" to depict the overall loss of democratic quality in the world over the last decade (Alizada et al. 2021; Hellmeier et al. 2021; Boese et al. 2022). In their democracy report 2020, they admit that the world is more democratic than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, but "a trend of autocratisation is ongoing" that effects 25 countries in 2020 where 34% of the world's population lives (Alizada et al. 2021, 9; Hellmeier et al. 2021, 1053). The number of democratising countries has divided in half. Freedom of expression, deliberation, rule of law and elections show the most substantial net declines in the last decade. Mass mobilisation has gone down to its lowest level in over a decade due to restrictions on the freedom of assembly set in place during the global Covid-19 pandemic. V-Dem's democracy reports of 2022 (Boese et al. 2022) and of 2023 provide evidence for a continuation of the autocratisation trend from the previous years. In fact, in 2023, the V-Dem team (Papada et al. 2023, 6) states that "advances in global levels of democracy made over the last 35 years have been wiped out. 72% of the world's population

– 5.7 billion people – live in autocracies by 2022. The level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2022 is down to 1986 levels."

What all contributors to this debate have in common is their focus on negative developments in countries that have already established a certain level of democracy, either in young or in well consolidated mature democracies, and are now about to lose ground in scoring on democracy scales. They differ to the extent to which they include countries into their analysis that have not (yet) started to depart from authoritarianism. Case-study oriented researchers mostly prefer to focus exclusively on established democracies whereas comparatively oriented large-n accounts seek to include all countries in the world (meaning both democracies and autocracies and those regimes hovering in-between) into their analysis.

In EMBRACE, the term "de-democratisation" is preferred over "democratic backsliding" or "democratic regression" to facilitate a direct comparison with the process of democratisation. De-democratisation indicates a starting point, democracy, and a direction, less democracy (Bogaards 2018, 1482). De-democratisation is underway as a process of reversing democratisation, lowering democratic quality, reducing democratic freedom and strengthening authoritarian elements (even in the most mature democracies) (OECD 2010). The term itself, however, does not preclude assumptions about causes, conditions, and culprits, nor about speed, extent, and endpoint, but leaves these aspects for empirical analysis.

Additionally, EMBRACE uses the term of "autocratisation" to capture the strengthening and consolidation of authoritarian rule in countries that have been under authoritarian rule already for quite some time. In these regimes, the starting point is autocracy and the processes of consolidating authoritarian rule and strengthen it against reform demands is autocratisation. In these countries, the ruling incumbents show little to no interest in liberalisation or democratisation, or, at best, pay only lip service to the donor talk on promoting democracy, protecting human rights, assuring equality or strengthening the rule of law. Although frequently challenged by popular uprisings (→*WP4*), contesting elites (→*WP5*), or violent conflict (→*WP6*), these countries on an every-day-basis proof to be resilient in authoritarianism, and actively prevent democratisation to take place in their country. Authoritarian governments employ various means such as repression, co-optation and strategies of legitimisation to secure their tight grip on power and bind the population domestically to authoritarian rule (Gerschewski 2013). Such authoritarian resilience is additionally supported from the outside through the rise of authoritarian powers at global stage, creating networks of autocracies that counter liberal Western policies (→*WP7*).

Both phenomena, namely de-democratisation and autocratisation, can be observed in the European Neighbourhood and will be empirically investigated in EMBRACE, both through large-n (→*WP3*) and middle-n comparative research (→*WP4, WP5, WP6, WP7*).

3   Assumptions on democracy, democracy promotion and EUDP

3.1 A multi-dimensional concept of democracy

When speaking about democracy promotion, it clearly needs to be defined, what "democracy" means that should be or is actually promoted in countries in transition, young democracies, hybrid regimes or authoritarian regimes. It is beyond the scope of this paper to summarize the scholarly discourse on democracy theory (for an overview see Held 1996; Beetham 2000; Schmidt 2010). It also needs to be noted that the EU itself does not dispose of one fine-grained, well-thought through concept of democracy on which all its internal and external activities would be build (nor do any other regional or international organisations or state agencies engaged in democracy promotion). However, there is (sort of) a European democracy consensus that shines through many EU documents, proceedings and decisions. It is grounded in a rather liberal understanding of democracy, including the protection of (political and civil, but to a lesser extent social) human rights, equality, and the rule of law.

For analytical purposes, EMBRACE uses a multidimensional analytical concept of democracy that comes close to the EU's understanding of the term. It goes beyond Dahl's (1971) electoral democracy as a rather minimalist concept of democracy and incorporates further democratic principles in the tradition of "embedded democracy" (Merkel 2004) for an institutionalist-procedural understanding of democracy (see also Juon and Bochsler 2020, 392-394 for a discussion). In line with North' (1990, 3) most widespread and comprehensive definition, political institutions are understood as "the rules of the game" and the "humanly devised constraints that shape human behavior". Political institutions are the rules according to which political actors play. Political institutions are the normative-procedural core of embedded democracy, allowing for a fair and inclusive process of political decision-making to take place.

Merkel's (2004) concept of a constitutional democracy has three dimensions: (1) vertical legitimacy; (2) horizontal accountability plus rule of law; and (3) effective government. Vertical legitimacy pertains to the relationship between citizens and rulers through elections and political rights. The horizontal dimension encompasses liberal constitutionalism and horizontal accountability. Effective government means that only duly elected representatives can make authoritative decisions. Stable constitutional democracies are "embedded" internally and externally (leading to the term "embedded democracy") in several ways.

Internally, democracy is secured by the interdependence of five different partial regimes (A) a democratic electoral regime, (B) political rights of participation, (C) civil rights, (D) horizontal accountability, and, (E) the guarantee that the effective power to govern lies in the hands of democratically elected representatives. If (A) is given, a country can be called "electoral democracy"; if (B)-(D) additionally are given, a country can be called "liberal constitutional democracy". Externally, these five partial regimes are secured by a context conducive to democracy, which protects it from outer as well as inner shocks and destabilizing tendencies. The most important rings in which a democracy is externally embedded are statehood, civil society, the socio-economic context, and regional as well as international integration. These

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rings, as Merkel (2004: 44) argues, "represent the conditions of possibility and impossibility that raise or lower the quality of a liberal democracy but are not defining components of the democratic regime itself" (for further concept discussions see Merkel, 2004).[1]

Referring to this concept, direct democracy promotion that targets the five core partial regimes of embedded democracy can be differentiated from indirect democracy promotion that focuses upon the outer rings in which liberal constitutional democracies are externally embedded (see *Figure 1* and section 3.2 further below).

Figure 1. Embedded Democracy and Democracy Promotion

'Embedded democracy and democracy promotion'
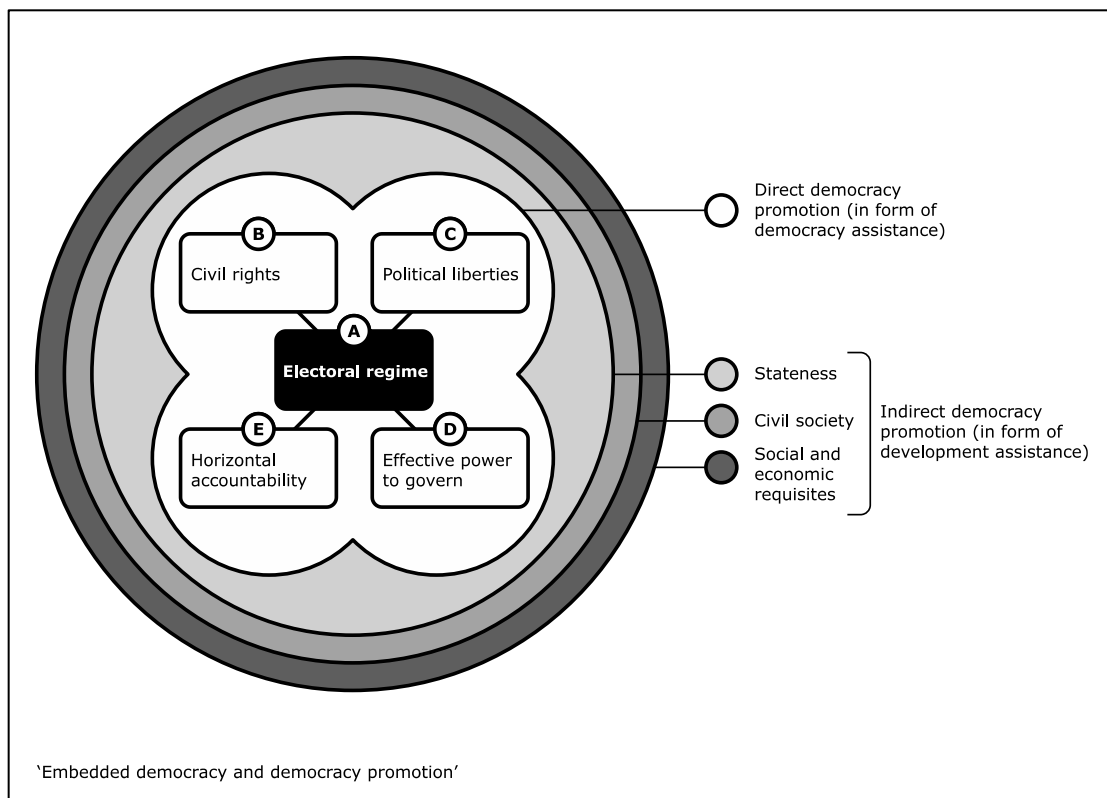
Source: Grimm and Mathis (2018): Online Appendix. Adapted from Merkel (2004). *Design*: Eva Klose.

This institutionalist-procedural understanding of democracy is very much in line with an understanding of democracy that the EU promotes in many of its proceedings and defends in

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1   Merkel and his team suggest measuring the five partial regimes with ten criteria, which are operationalised with a total of 34 indicators. When any of these criteria of democracy are violated, Merkel et al. (Croissant and Thiery 2000; Merkel et al. 2003; Merkel 2004; Merkel et al. 2006) identify a defective democracy, defined as "democracies in which the partial regimes are no longer mutually embedded, the logic of constitutional democracy becoming disrupted" (Merkel 2004, 48). Therefore, a regime can be(come) less democratic or even undemocratic in multiple ways. "Embedded democracy" has become the theoretical baseline concept for the Bertelsmann Transformation Index [https://bti-project.org/en/] that measures and compares transformation processes in 137 developing and transformation countries, and the Democracy Barometer [https://democracybarometer.org] comparing the quality of 53 mature democracies (Version 7). It has inspired large-n data collection such as the V-DEM data collection project [https://www.v-dem.net].

its external policies. It encompasses three dimensions: The first dimension refers to institutions of popular control and decision-making which make the government responsive to citizens' preferences (vertical accountability) and determine the inclusiveness of this process. These institutions allow for broad-based participation and enable elected governments to implement their electoral pledges effectively. The institutions in the first dimension are embedded in a second dimension, consisting of the liberal protections of citizens' rights against the excessive accumulation of power by elected officials. This includes institutions and practices which form the basis for free political debate, checks and balances to limit the power of governments, civil rights, the rule of law and the transparency of state action. The third dimension addresses the intermediaries between political institutions, civil society and the wider public sphere, determining the quality of their interrelationships (Juon and Bochsler 2020; Merkel 2004).

Ideally, democratic institutions assure equal access to power and participation in decision-making for all members of a political community; they provide opportunities for controlling those in power. While the procedures of the democratic game are fixed, the results of decision-making are open-ended.

3.2 The international promotion of democracy

Early on in the study of democracy promotion, scholars have differentiated between undirected and directed mechanisms to support democratisation from the outside. As an undirected mechanism, policy diffusion spreads liberal democratic norms and values globally through mechanisms such as coercion, competition, emulation, and learning (Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007; Gilardi 2012). Democracy and human rights were propagated through global fora that international and regional organisations or governmental summits provide, through non-governmental activist networks or through civil society engagement (Schmitz 2004; Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Keck and Sikkink 1998). Domestic political actors take over such norms and implement them in domestic political systems, if they are convinced of the social or political appropriateness of such norms or if they expect to make political or economic gains through norm implementation.

As a directed mechanism, external democracy-promoting actors intentionally and willingly promote and protect democracy through measures of democracy and development assistance (Burnell 2000; Carothers 1999). Following Carothers (2009), direct and indirect approaches to democracy promotion can be differentiated. Through direct democracy promotion in the form of democracy assistance (also named targeted democracy assistance, democracy aid, democracy support, political aid, and/or political development aid) external actors directly fund political institution-building, strengthen the capacity to respect and implement human rights and the rule of law, empower political actors to play according to democratic rules, and contribute to build democratic political communities. External actors complement democracy promotion funding lines with techniques of diplomacy and

persuasion, the transfer of technical expertise through sending staff, or the deployment of academic and policy experts who can give advice on crafting institutions. Carothers calls this type of direct democracy assistance also the "political" approach to democracy promotion as it directly targets the political institutions as the heart of the political arena. Due to its intrusive nature, direct democracy promotion is highly politicised (Carothers 2009).

Through indirect democracy promotion in the form of development assistance (also named development or foreign aid), external democracy promoters seek to create context conditions that are conducive for democratisation (Carothers 2009; Grimm and Mathis 2015, 2018). Carothers (2009) calls this approach the "developmental" approach to democracy promotion and focuses on socio-economic development, the building of state-capacity and the support of civil society organisations through financial and technical means. Following the lines of modernisation theory (Acemoglu et al. 2009; Epstein et al. 2006; Ingelhart 1997; Przeworski and Limongi 1997; Rössel 2000; Ulfelder and Lustik 2007; Zapf 2004, among others), Carothers argues that democracy is more likely to survive in a country that is economically prosperous and stable whereas economic crisis increases the likelihood that democracy fails.

Hence, means of direct democracy promotion target the core partial regimes of democracy whereas indirect democracy promotion targets the outer rings in which the core regimes of democracy are embedded (*Figure 1*).

Expanding on Carothers' account, as a further crucial context condition in conflict-affected settings, one can add the creation of stability, security and peace as outer rings. Following peace and conflict studies, through the means of statebuilding (that contributes to the out ring of "stateness"), external actors seek to stabilise post-conflict societies and build a stable ground for democratisation (Zeeuw and Kumar 2006; Manning 2006, 2007, 2008). Regular free and fair elections, the protection of human rights and the rule of law, transparent and fair public administration, the building of vivid political communities, to name but a few democracy-related goals are part of the international statebuilding agenda in the tradition of the liberal peace (Caplan 2005; Chesterman 2004; Paris 2002, 2004). However, as many critics argue, it is demanding too much of a conflict-affected society to expect democracy to flourish early on if relevant conditions are not met: relevant political actors are lacking prior experience with and political will for democratisation (Chandler 2000, 2004; Diamond 2005) or pursue political interests that do not coincide with those of external state-builders (Groß 2014; Groß and Grimm 2016). Other common challenges are peace-builders overlooking the everyday needs of local communities (Richmond 2011a; Richmond and Mitchell 2011) and disregarding local social and cultural habits for building peace (Autesserre 2021, 2015). EMBRACE will check to what extent peacebuilding might create blockages to democratisation (→*WP6*).

Finally, the deeper integration into the community of democracies can be another mechanism of strengthening democracy indirectly. Theories focusing on linkages such as Levitzky and Way's (2006, 2005, 2002) highly cited theoretical account on the rise of hybrid regimes (also

named "competitive autocracies") identify an increase of economic, cultural, social or geographic ties between consolidated democracies and countries in transition as conducive for democratisation. Vice versa, a lack of economic, cultural, social or geographic ties reduces democracy promoters' leverage on democratizing countries and increases the likelihood of incomplete or failed transition to democracy; the emergence of hybrid or (semi)authoritarian regimes are a consequence unwelcomed by democracy promoters (see Levitzky and Way (2006, 2005, 2002) for more details and Sasse (2013) or Yilmaz (2002) for further discussion). "Competitive autocracies" look like democracies as they make use of democratic institutions such as periodic elections, but in essence, these seemingly democratic institutions are fraudulent, core democratic procedures are violated, and pro-democratic actors are actively compromised leading to de facto façade democracies.

3.3 Supporting democratisation through EUDP

EUDP is very much in line with the international agenda of promoting and protecting democracy abroad as described in the previous section. Both the European Union (EU) (represented by the European Commission) and EU member states (20 out of 27) are part of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) where democracy promotion activities are reported as part of the "Official Development Assistance" (ODA) statistics, and policies in the frame of promoting and protecting democracy and development are aligned (OECD 1978, 2011, 2019, 2021). With its EUDP policy, the EU seeks to increase the quality of democracy in the European Neighbourhood aiming for an increase in levels of democracy.

The EU's basic values and democracy consensus is laid out in Art. 2 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU) stating that:

> "The 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. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail." (Art. 2 TEU)

Bringing the TEU and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights together, the six main values can be described as follows:

(1) Human dignity: For the EU members, all life is precious and hence human dignity is inviolable within and outside of the EU. Human dignity has to be protected and constitutes the real basis of fundamental rights.

(2) Freedom: "Freedom" includes the freedom of movement as well as individual freedoms such as protection of private life, freedom of thought and speech, religion, and assembly. These freedoms are protected by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

(3) Democracy: The functioning of the EU is founded on representative democracy. A European citizen automatically enjoys political rights. Every adult EU citizen has the

right to stand as a candidate and to vote in elections to the European Parliament. EU citizens have the right to stand as a candidate and to vote in their country of residence, or in their country of origin. Democracy is the preferred political system by the EU.

(4) <u>Equality</u>: Equality is about equal rights for all citizens before the law. The principle of equality between women and men underpins all European policies and is the basis for European integration. It applies in all areas.

(5) <u>Rule of Law</u>: The EU is based on the rule of law. Everything the EU does is founded on treaties, voluntarily and democratically agreed by its EU countries. Law and justice are upheld by an independent judiciary. The EU countries gave final jurisdiction to the European Court of Justice - its judgments have to be respected by all.

(6) <u>Respect for Human rights</u>: Human rights cover the right to be free from discrimination on the basis of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, the right to the protection of your personal data, and the right to get access to justice. They are protected by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (European Union 2023).

Relying on this democracy consensus, the EU seeks to incentivise domestic political actors to support democratisation, to implement democratic institutions and to play according to democratic rules (Freyburg et al. 2009; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004). EUDP directly contributes to the building of democratic institutions, for example in enabling the drafting of democratic constitutions, in improving the protection of human rights, gender equality and the rule of law or in monitoring democratic elections (Grimm and Leininger 2012). EUDP employs peaceful means such as diplomacy and political dialogue, technical and functional cooperation, (financial) developmental and democracy assistance, as well as political and membership conditionality (Grimm 2019; Kotzian, Knodt, and Urdze 2011). The Union is part of international statebuilding supporting the inclusion of democratic elements into peace agreements, post-conflict constitutions and peace mission mandates (Paris 2002; Blockmans, Wouters, and Ruys 2010). At times, sanctions are implemented to punish gross human rights violations (Hellquist 2019; Kotzian, Knodt, and Urdze 2011; Portela 2010). These policies effect both the direct EU neighbourhood as well as partners in other world regions (Bellamy and Williams 2005; Keukeleire and Delreux 2014).

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, security concerns have dominated the Union's foreign policy agenda, including EUDP (Council of the European Union 2003). The European Commission and the Council of the European Union (European Commission 2006; Council of the European Union 2020, 2019) have regularly highlighted the importance of ensuring human rights, the rule of law and inclusive democracy to avoid alienating communities and creating conditions of insecurity. In promoting democracy, the Union intends to build stable, reliable partners, to strengthen the partners' resilience in the neighbourhood (EU Global Strategy 2016, 23), to increase human security and to contribute to regional security and stability.

Since the early 1990s, the Union has used EUDP as a policy to support democratisation from the outside in partner countries. In its neighbourhood, the EU increasingly relies on two

approaches to promote democracy. First, it builds on the enlargement policy framework targeting countries with membership aspirations that have been granted (potential) candidate status. Second, the cooperation is structured around the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) which guides cooperation with EU eastern and southern neighbours and is mean to promote cooperation outside of enlargement framework. Both approaches presuppose efforts to sustain democracy and reward successful endeavours supporting and advancing democratisation, for example through giving more financial funds or in signing further economic or political cooperation agreements. The channelling of funds through EU financial and technical instruments is complemented by country-specific strategies for supporting the development of human rights and democracy. Additionally, the human rights and democracy legal clauses in cooperation and trade agreements allow the EU to suspend trade or other forms of economic and political cooperation if a country commits serious violations of human rights or democratic principles.

In an ideal world, following Levitsky and Way's (2006) theoretical account of how and under what conditions international democracy promotion positively influences and contributes to democratisation, democracy promotion would exert its influence as displayed in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2. The "rosy" picture of democracy promotion and EUDP
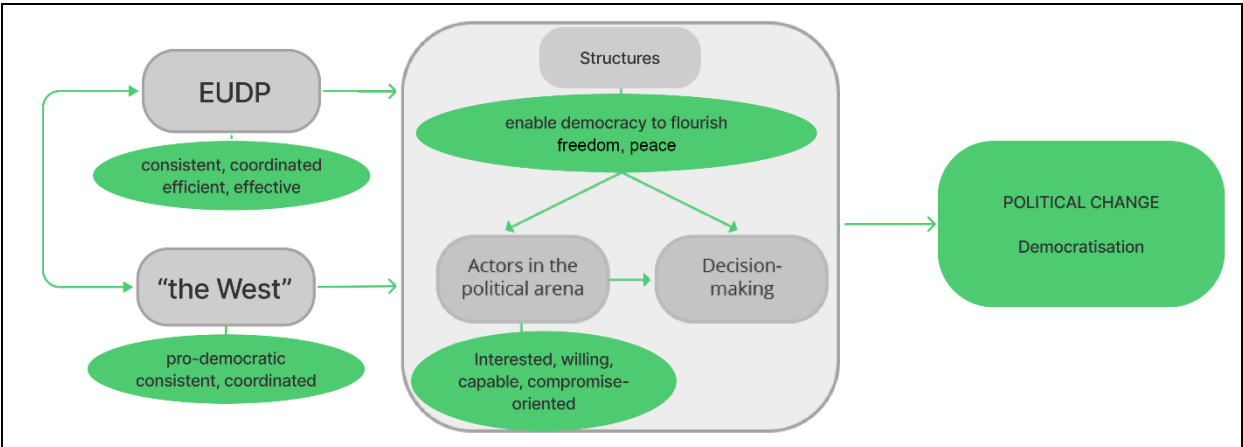
Source: Author's compilation.

Combining structural linkages and behavioural leverage, Levitsky and Way's (2006) hypothesise that external actors such as the EU can effectively support democratisation from the outside if they consistently exert democratisation pressure on countries in transition. The higher the leverage of the external democracy promoter over regime incumbents and the higher the beneficiary country's economic, social and cultural linkages to the "West", the greater the likelihood of successful democratisation (Levitsky and Way 2006). This mechanism works particularly well when the politically relevant actors are interested, willing and able to reach political compromise and implement the externally requested reforms. These actors work as "gatekeeper elites" (Tolstrup 2013). They interact with external actors, negotiate with them the substance of policy reforms (typically in return for incentives or rewards) and have

the final say on the shape and implementation of political reforms (Grimm 2019). These elites can decide whether to drive or to block democratisation (→*WP4, 5, 6, 7*).

3.4 Explaining mixed democracy promotion results

Although democracy promotion from the outside ought to have a positive effect on levels of democracy, the scholarly findings on the effects are inconclusive. Existing quantitative scholarship finds generic foreign aid at best weakly or even negatively associated with democratisation in recipient countries (Knack 2004; S.E. Finkel, Pérez-Linán, and Seligson 2007; Djankov, Montalvo, and Reynal-Querol 2008; Azpuru de Cuestas et al. 2008; Altunbaş and Thornton 2014). In contrast, the effects of specific democracy assistance on democratisation are mostly found to be positive (S.E. Finkel, Pérez-Linán, and Seligson 2007; Kalyvitis and Vlachaki 2010, 2012; James M. Scott and Steele 2005, 2011), but they turn weak when other relevant factors such as socio-economic development are controlled for (Grimm and Mathis 2015, 2018). Hence, the effects of generic aid are rather ambiguous, while the positive impact of targeted democracy assistance is less contested (→*WP2*).

To explain these mixed results, scholars hint to contradictions, dilemmas and conflicting objectives. Good things rarely if ever go hand in hand, as Grimm and Leininger (2012) have already argued a decade ago. Democracy promoting countries are not unitary actors, and different state agencies often pursue conflicting foreign policy goals (Grävingholt, Leininger, and Schlumberger 2009; Leininger 2010). Frequently, democracy promotion objectives get compromised for the sake of higher ranked foreign policy goals such as stability, security or economic cooperation (Grimm and Mathis 2015; Richter 2012; Grimm and Leininger 2012).

Additionally, there are tensions inherent in democracy promotion and its concept of democracy; if different democracy promoters fail to coordinate and align, political institutions are promoted that contradict or even block each other (Grimm and Leininger 2012, 397-399). For example, pre-defined power-sharing mechanisms might clash with the core democratic principle of free and fair elections, and entrench pre-war conflicts into a post-war political system (Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka 2022); the highly thought after empowerment of domestic political actors might increase their discontent with the political institutions that have originally been supported by external pro-democratic actors (Wolff 2012); and the internationally demanded local ownership might rapidly reveal contradicting norms, interests, and priorities of domestic and external actors (Grimm and Leininger 2012, 397-399). Hence, even well-intended democracy promotion policies can create (unintended) effects up to blockages negatively influencing democratisation.

Blurred behaviour of pro-democracy oriented external actors is further aggravated by the influence of overtly democracy-averse external actors. Following Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner (2010), Way (2015a, 2016), Tansey (2016), and Brownlee (2017) among others, it might be going too far to speak about "autocracy promotion" as a well-organised, intentionally implemented, ideology-driven policy equivalent to democracy promotion that is

directed to overtly promote autocracy. But the influence of rising authoritarianism is felt all round the world (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Ambrosio 2010). Expanding authoritarianism is either an express objective of authoritarian incumbents' foreign policy or a side effect of their push to strengthen authoritarian incumbents' economic and diplomatic power (Hackenesch and Bader 2020; Hackenesch 2015; Bader and Kästner 2012; von Soest 2015; Way 2015a, 2016). China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to name but a few, seek to influence the political direction of countries of interest to them (Tolstrup 2009; Bader 2015b, 2015a; Odinius and Kuntz 2015; Way 2015a). Thereby, they contribute to stabilise incumbent authoritarian governments, or to produce antidemocratic effects in (young and old) democracies (Tansey, Koehler, and Schmotz 2017). Particularly China with its economic success (still) presents a governance model that offers an alternative to Western liberal democracy – a model that grows in credibility with the emergence of every political or economic crisis within the world of established Western democracies (Carothers 2020, 117-118). Furthermore, China and Russia provide role models to authoritarian incumbents in how to internally strengthen authoritarian regimes and make them resilient against democratic challengers from the in- and the outside, as the authoritarian responses to the colour and flower revolutions and the Arab spring have exemplarily shown (Beachain and Polese 2010; Bunce and Koesel 2013).

Democracy-averse external actors transnationally influence domestic political developments in several ways: they reach across borders to manipulate election campaigns and processes (Tolstrup 2015); they build coalitions with anti-democratic actors when it serves common interests (Buzogány 2017); they discredit independent civil society actors and shrink space for civil society to manoeuvre (Poppe and Wolff 2017); and they disrepute independent media and manipulate the public information space across borders, for example through domestic and transnational disinformation campaigns (Carothers 2020, 119). Depending on the nature of the political regime, this can either contribute to stabilise authoritarian incumbents or destabilise seemingly stable democracies. China's policy towards political regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa is an example for the former (Bader 2015b, 2015a); Russia's interference into the US elections and its support for Donald Trump's presidential campaign in 2016 facilitating his electoral victory is a case in point for the latter (Mayer 2018).

Although the digital age provides facilities allowing to transcend geographical boundaries, authoritarian regimes are still more successful in exerting influence transnationally if they can direct their sway to countries in the immediate neighbourhood (instead of countries that are located more abroad) and if they share a common language (such as Russian in the post-soviet space or Arabic in the Middle East) (Bader 2015a; Tolstrup 2009, 2015; Way 2015a; Tansey, Koehler, and Schmotz 2017; Brinks and Coppedge 2006). Hence, regional clustering matters. In the European neighbourhood, both Russian as well as Arabic speaking communities are concerned. It can be assumed that powerful democracy-averse actors increasingly exert anti-democratic influence on countries in the Eastern and the Southern dimension of the European neighbourhood, reducing the EU's leverage on domestic politics in both regions (→*WP7*).

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In fact, the rosy picture of democracy promotion that is consistently exerted by well-coordinated Western powers has rarely reflected reality, if ever. International democracy promotion has always been partially undermined by conflicting geopolitical (Jamal 2012) or partisan objectives (Levin 2020; Bubeck and Marinov 2019) and open to critique on many dimensions (Goldsmith 2008). The same applies to EUDP.

Early on, the literature on EU compliance has explained the failure to fully adopt EU norms and rules in terms of resistance on the domestic side that is due to strategic considerations of the political elites who have to weigh adoption costs against benefits of compliance (Freyburg and Richter 2010; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004). According to this line of argument, domestic actors (or at least some of them) oppose democratic statebuilding because they prefer less democratic solutions which would keep them in their position of power. Similarly, critical peacebuilding scholars have hinted at local resistance against international attempts at restructuring states based on liberal-democratic principles (Mac Ginty 2010; Richmond and Mitchell 2011; Richmond 2010).

The concept of liberal democracy itself has become increasingly contested. EUDP's strategy and substance are questioned by local communities (Abbott and Teti 2021; Teti et al. 2020) as well as by policy-makers, EU-internal critics and scholars alike (Wetzel, Orbie, and Bossuyt 2015; Wetzel and Orbie 2015). Neoliberal policies based on values such as individualism, privatisation and economic liberalisation have failed to improve the well-being of a majority of the people but increased socio-economic injustices. Politically powerful elites have been able to further maximise their socio-economic gains, fuelling illiberal, conservative, populist and authoritarian tendencies (EDP Network 2018). The crisis of democracy as described in section 2 further increases the choir of critics.

Powerful alliances of external actors opposing the Western project of promoting and protecting democracy have begun to back reform-averse domestic actors, increasing their leverage in domestic decision-making (Noutcheva 2018; Tolstrup 2015; Hackenesch and Bader 2020). And like in many major democracies, the EU increasingly is confronted with authoritarianism from the inside. Populist incumbents have been on the rise inside several EU member states, backing EU-internal critiques and questioning the legitimacy of promoting democracy abroad (Kelemen 2020; Szent-Inányi and Kugiel 2020). Such criticism negatively effects the EU's legitimacy and capacity to promote democracy to the outside and limits is leverage on authoritarian incumbents (Grimm 2015).

To systematise these factors that negatively influence democratisation and to combine them in a well-structured analytical framework, EMBRACE suggests the study of blockages to democratisation as described in the next section.

4   An analytical model for the study of blockages to democratisation

4.1 Policymaking in the domestic political arena

EMBRACE starts its empirical investigation in the domestic political arena of an EUDP beneficiary country. Here, EMBRACE focuses on those domestic actors that are relevant for decision-making. This includes (representatives of) governments, state bureaucracies, parliaments, political parties, judiciary and representatives of local communities, civil society organisations and social movements, as well as elders, clerics and journalists. Collective action (such as mass protest) and other politically relevant actors (such as non-state economic elites) also need to be considered. In functioning democracies, members of executives and legislatures formally take political decisions, while they are dependent on the support of their selectorate to stay in power (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Morrow et al. 2008). In hybrid regimes and autocracies, it is a smaller group of the ruling coalition on whose support the incumbent necessarily relies upon (Svolik 2009; Weeks 2012). In either type of political regime, reform-oriented and reform-adverse actors, political coalitions and/or (more loosely connected) alliances can be found.

Decision-makers in any political regime are regularly confronted with societal and international pressures for political change. Such demands might stem from the conflict between incumbent political actors and their contesting counterparts over issues of democratisation in situations of popular uprisings (→*WP4*), over legitimizing hegemonic discourses in situations of economic modernisation in authoritarian and hybrid regimes (→*WP5*), over societal peacebuilding in post-war societies (→*WP6*), or over conflicts over geopolitical orientation and its implications for democratisation (→*WP7*).

Such demands for change can range from moderate to substantial, from minor institutional reform over the exchange of political personnel up to complete regime change (Groß and Grimm 2014). Depending on the regime type and political mindset, decision-makers can use various means to handle reform demands: they can negotiate with the reform-seekers, offer political or socio-economic concessions, and draft reform laws; they can modify the demands and adapt them to their own political purposes; or they can pay lip service, slow down reform processes or even reject such demands (Grimm 2019). Decision-makers can use coercion or repression to contain reform demands and secure their grip on power (Chenoweth, Perkoski, and Kang 2017). What they need is the support of the ruling elite(s) (that is a parliamentary majority and/or a majority in the executive) to push reforms through.

Functioning constitutional democracies are built on the assumption that such reform processes follow the lines of the policy-cycle within the democratic rules of the game, build on democratic coalition formation by responsible political actors (Scharpf 1973; J.E. Anderson 1975). In constitutional democracies, executives backed by their parliamentary majorities

draft and decide upon institutional reform. Hence, ideally, political actors build coalitions and draft laws, that are in line with the democratic constitution, conditional upon juridical review.

In hybrid and authoritarian regimes, policymaking looks more like muddling through. Authoritarian incumbents use nominally democratic institutions such as legislatures to solicit cooperation and to neutralize the threat of rebellion from forces within society (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Gandhi 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). But at the same time, they also seek to control nominally democratic procedures such as elections (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009) and prevent political reform that could endanger their grip on political power. Consequently, successful authoritarian rulers shrink the space for pro-democratic reforms and the actors promoting them seeking to avoid any sort of democratisation to take place (Bethke and Wolff 2020; Poppe and Wolff 2017).

Following the model of rational political actors, it can be assumed that political actors support political reforms if they are either convinced by the appropriateness of the reform, if the reform promises to benefit their political or economic interests or if the reform increases their chances to gain (or keep) political power. Typically, reform-oriented actors drive political change while reform-adverse actors are sceptical towards change, particularly if they expect to lose if the reform proposals on the negotiation table are implemented. These expectations will not make them supporters of reform, but instead lead to status-quo seeking behaviour. It can be reasonably assumed that reform-oriented actors are more likely to be prone to support democratisation while reform-adverse actors more frequently seek to countervail such efforts supporting de-democratisation or authoritarian persistence.

It needs to be noted that, in reality, the lines between reform-oriented and reform-adverse actors are frequently blurred: political actors can support a reform in one specific field of policymaking while blocking reform in another. Hence, political preferences and power-seeking behaviour are very important factors to be considered when studying (constellations of) political actors and their behaviour in policymaking (→*WP4, WP5, WP6, WP7*).

4.2 The influence of external actors upon domestic policymaking

In today's world, policymaking is not a totally domestic affair anymore. In fact, external actors seek to influence domestic political actors in decision-making about the trajectories of political reform. External actors get engaged in policymaking in the domestic arena through their interaction with domestic actors (Groß and Grimm 2014, 2016). They make political offers to incentivise or prevent specific types of political reform (Grimm 2019; Poppe, Leininger, and Wolff 2019). Democracy-promoting external actors seek to advance democratisation while external actors who are more prone to authoritarianism seek to countervail these efforts.

A new generation of democracy promotion scholars conceptualises democracy promotion as an interactive process between domestic and external actors where the content of reforms leading to democratisation is negotiated (Grimm 2019; Poppe, Leininger, and Wolff 2019;

Wetzel, Orbie, and Bossuyt 2015). EMBRACE follows this new line of thinking assuming that external democracy promoters and domestically relevant political actors negotiate contents, scope and procedures of political reforms. Democracy-promoting external actors (such as the EU) use their democracy promotion toolbox to exert leverage on domestic actors (Vachudova 2005; Levitsky and Way 2006; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2010; Tolstrup 2013). They seek to convince domestic actors about reform drafts and offer expert advice or financial assistance to political actors in order to incentivise and reward reforms (Grimm and Mathis 2018). At times, these external actors even punish the lack of reforms by withdrawing financial assistance or imposing political or economic sanctions (Hackenesch 2019; del Biondo 2015; Kotzian, Knodt, and Urdze 2011).

As a main external democracy-promoting actor, EMBRACE investigates the EU's contribution to domestic political decision-making in partner countries. EMBRACE analyses the toolbox of EUDP, its ambitions to support democratic change and its priorities, instruments, resources, and democracy concept and examines to what extent these fit the local needs and interests represented in the partner country (for more details see →*WP2*). It is also analysed to what extent EUDP is ready to defend democracy if there is a prevalent risk of de-democratisation.

But the EU is not the only external actor in town. As described above, other major powers seek to influence political decision-making on whichever conflict issue is current in the domestic political arena under investigation. In the European Neighbourhood, these powers include states such as the USA, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey and their respective agencies, as well as other relevant regional or international organisations (such as the OSCE, the European Council, NATO, the United Nations, the IMF and the World Bank). Some of the external actors' diplomatic, political, or economic policies are pro-democracy-oriented; others clearly rival EUDP while the direction of these interventions – even from EU "friends" – may be less clear than expected.

In fact, Russia, especially after Crimea's annexation in 2014, and Xi Jinping's China are nowadays much more prone to use coercive diplomacy and economic pressure to bend other countries to its will along with various forms of financial assistance and trade benefits (Ohanyan 2018; Maçães 2019; Chen Weiss 2019; Shambaugh 2020; Cooley and Nexon 2020). These actors' interventions have mounted an outright challenge to the "international liberal order" (Mearsheimer 2019; Ikenberry 2020). Instead, authoritarian incumbents have been offering an alternative governance model based on authoritarian leadership, emphasise national sovereignty, and the subordination of the economy and society to the strong state. Other authoritarian and semi-authoritarian powers such as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia also have become more active on the EU's periphery stretching from the Sahel and North Africa to the Southern Caucasus through the Western Balkans (Popescu and Secrieru 2018; Ghatas 2021; Bechev 2022; Bieber and Tzifakis 2020). Whether democracy-averse external actors use an "autocracy promotion toolbox" (Way 2015a, 2016). In the European Neighbourhood in a similar way as the EU uses its democracy promoting toolbox remains to be studied (→*WP7*).

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The interaction of external and domestic actors in decision-making can be observed throughout the entire policy-process (Grimm 2019). If domestic and external actors coincide in their preferences for improving the quality of democracy, reform-oriented actors hardly need to be incentivised to advance democratisation. In this case, reform-oriented actors should be willing and able to negotiate with external actors the substance of pro-democracy reform and implement the outcomes of such negotiations. Reform-adverse actors, however, frequently pursue an alternative agenda; they might compromise democracy for personal profit and/or for the sake of higher-ranked priorities such as economic development or social participation; they might even argue that goals of common interest can only be achieved at the expense of liberal rights and democracy. As a consequence, democracy promoting external actors need to think harder of how to incentivise democratisation from the outside if reform-adverse actors are domestically in the driver's seat. And they need to take constellations of blockages to democratisation into account.

EMBRACE investigates the constellations of actors relevant to democratisation, their political behaviour, and the alliances that external actors create with domestic political actors to influence decision-making. EMBRACE expects that specific constellations of change-averse domestic actors within the domestic arena of a country under investigation intentionally create blockages to democratisation (→*WP4, WP5, WP6*). Occasionally, anti-democratic domestic actors are backed by alliances with like-minded anti-democratic external actors (who share the same language and are geographically close) (→*WP7*).

4.3 Blockages to democratisation

The process of policymaking can be blocked through various constellations of factors. Pogodda, Richmond and Visoka (2022) have firstly studied blockages to peace in post-conflict situations to explain stalled peacebuilding. Driving this work further, EMBRACE conceptualises blockages as obstacles to democratisation that persist or occasionally emerge in the process of politics. If they are not managed well, these blockages negatively influence democratisation. More precisely, the acceptance and exploitation of blockages by politically relevant actors explain stalled democratisation.

EMBRACE differentiates three types of blockages to democratisation: behavioural, institutional and structural blockages. EMBRACE assumes that various constellations of blockages negatively influence democratisation and contribute to processes of de-democratisation (see *Figure 3*).

Figure 3. *EMBRACE's concept of blockages to democratisation*
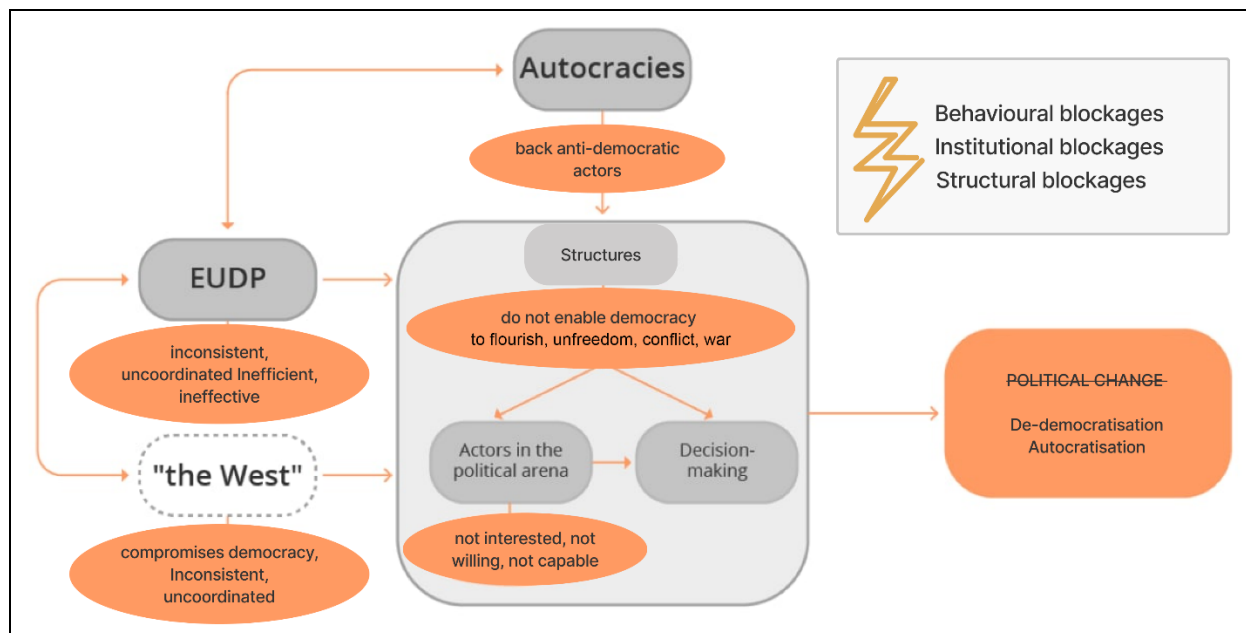
Source: Author's compilation.

4.3.1 Behavioural blockages

Behavioural blockages mean the dysfunctional, state-capturing or anti-reform-oriented behaviour of politically relevant actors (see, for example, Richter/Wunsch (2020)). EMBRACE studies the constellations of domestic and external actors and sheds light on how blockages emerge in or influence their interaction when issues of democratisation are negotiated. Behavioural blockages become virulent in the interaction of politically relevant actors, for example as a consequence of clashing political preferences and interests, or as a consequence of divergent opinions about those political processes that allow specific political outcomes to be achieved (Grimm 2019; Grimm and Leininger 2012). Both external and domestic actors can produce behavioural blockages, either individually or in their interaction. For example, anti-democratic tendencies in Hungarian and Polish domestic politics have led to an increase in anti-liberal vetoing behaviour by these two EU member states in the context of the Union's development cooperation and democracy promotion policies (Szent-Iványi and Kugiel 2020).

In a functioning democracy, responsible democrats play according to democratic rules and recognise political adversaries as legitimate players within the political arena. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 8) strongly argue that democracy survives if responsible politicians mutually recognise their contribution to the political competition. Additional to mutual recognition among rivalling political parties and leaders, a second virtue is important for democracy, namely forbearance. This is "the idea that politicians should exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 8).

In contrast, irresponsible political actors, particularly those in executive and legislative power, are a major peril for democracy. Anti-democratic leaders who have been elected to power on

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the promise to defend or advance democracy, in fact damage democracy during their tenure. They portray their political reforms as efforts to "improve" democracy, for example to make the judiciary more efficient, to combat corruption, or to clean up the electoral process. But in fact, authoritarian incumbents change constitutions substantially, prolong presidential and parliamentary terms, abolish the independence of the judiciary, control the media, intimidate, and control the political opposition. "Elected autocrats maintain a veneer of democracy while eviscerating its substance" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 7). Likewise, incumbent autocrats in authoritarian regimes prevent democratisation to get started.

Some democracy-adverse actors can easily be recognised because they have had an antidemocratic record even before they came into political power. Others transform in a more evolutionary way into authoritarians while being in office (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 21, 72-75). Building on Juan Linz' seminal book called "The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, & Reequilibration" (1978) , Levitzky and Ziblatt (2018, 21-22) suggest a set of four behavioural warning signs to identify an anti-democratic politician: such a person "(1) rejects, in words or action, the democratic rules of the game, (2) denies the legitimacy of opponents, (3) tolerates or encourages violence, or (4) indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media". Meeting one of the four criteria is sufficient to pass the "litmus test" of authoritarian behaviour; such a politician, particularly if s/he is president or prime minister becomes a major obstacle for democratisation.

Levitzky and Ziblatt (2018, 22) demonstrate that it is often populist outsiders of the political establishment who tend to test positive on the litmus test of authoritarian behaviour. Such figures claim to represent the voice of "the people", and wage war on what they describe as "corrupt" or "conspiratorial" elite. They deny the legitimacy of established political parties portraying them as "undemocratic" or "unpatriotic" while the political system is "hijacked", "corrupted" or "rigged by the elite". Populist outsiders promise to get rid of this malaise and bring "the people" back to power. But once in office, they tend to assault democratic institutions. Hence, the political discourse of politicians needs to be well observed as warning signals for authoritarian behaviour (**→WP4, WP5, WP6**).

If anti-democratic behaviour occurs in a constitutional democracy, and gatekeeping political actors fail to keep it out of the political process, the proper democratic institutions of policymaking can be used to de-democratise the political institutions in a way that is difficult to be reversed. Here, anti-democratically oriented executives and their parliamentary majorities can exploit democratic institutions to implement de-democratizing institutional changes. The larger the anti-democratic coalition, the more substantial institutional changes. Hungary is the most obvious case in point (Bogaards 2018): Landslide electoral victory in 2010 (confirmed in the 2014, 2018, and 2022 parliamentary elections) allowed Prime Minister Victor Orban's Fidesz Party to pass unilaterally a tremendous number of constitution-changing laws. With a comfortable two-thirds majority these institutional reforms have substantially altered the political system to the extent that Hungary's democracy has de-democratised in all five partial regimes of embedded democracy. Thereby, the Hungarian incumbent has

fundamentally abrogated vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms. "The government of the day puts its policies out of reach for future governments", Bogaards (2018, 1492) concludes.

But even without two-thirds majorities at hand, democracy-adverse incumbents backed by like-minded political coalitions can alter political institutions to the extent that de-democratisation or autocratisation can be observed. On the basis of coalition-formation with nationalist, extremist or patronage political parties, democracy-adverse politicians jointly attack mechanisms of checks and balances, accountability, and juridical independence, as well as media freedom to de-democratise or consolidate authoritarian rule. Authoritarian incumbents stay in power while popular control is effectively circumvented (Judis 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017).

4.3.2   Institutional blockages

Institutional blockages mean a set of dysfunctional political institutions, that emerge, intentionally or not, as the consequence of domestic political decision-making or external octroi. For example, the set of power-sharing institutions established under the international supervision of the Peace Implementation Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina have become an institutional blockage to further peacebuilding and democratisation in that country (see Pogodda, Richmond and Visoka (2022)). Institutional blockages can also be created through the mindful exploitation and politisation of political institutions by political actors. *De jure* a political institution might look democratic, but the way how political actors make use of it or exploit it for their political purposes *de facto* might lead to de-democratisation or autocratisation.

In the European neighbourhood, three basic types of political regimes can be identified that have chosen different trajectories to democratisation in the last three decades: (1) defective democracies and hybrid regimes that chose a trajectory of moderate democratisation (e.g. Albania, Armenia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Turkey), occasionally in the aftermath of popular uprisings (e.g. Serbia after the Bulldozer Revolution in 2000, Georgia after the Rose Revolution in 2003, Ukraine after the Orange Revolution in 2004, to a larger extent Tunisia and, to a minor extent, Morocco after the Arab Spring in 2011); (2) authoritarian regimes that at best pay lip service to democratisation demands or, more frequently, reject such demands (e.g. Algeria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Palestine, Syria); and (3) post-war political regimes whose (sometimes externally imposed) consociational democratic institutions have led to crisis-prone types of stalemate, hindering further democratisation (e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Lebanon).

In these regimes, political conflicts over the form and substance of democratisation emerge, which can be empirically studied. A political conflict is a situation of contention in the domestic political arena of the country under investigation, such as the conflict between political elites and civil society actors over issues of democratisation in situations of popular uprisings

(particularly investigated in →*WP4*), conflicts among elites over legitimising discourses in authoritarian and hybrid regimes (→*WP5*), conflicts over societal peacebuilding in post-war societies (→*WP6*), or conflicts over geopolitical orientation and its implications for democratisation (→*WP7*). These conflicts affect the three dimensions of democracy to different extents.

The subject of the interplay of domestic and external actors in democracy promotion is democratisation. As shown above, this can mean minor political reform, contention about the exchange of political personnel or major institutional restructuring that leads to regime change. Democratisation in politics influences democratisation in society or economy. EMBRACE assumes that EUDP intends to increase the quality of democracy in all three dimensions of democracy in EUDP beneficiary countries. However, institutional blockages can emerge at every stage of the reform process. The reform process can – intentionally or unintentionally – lead to the emergence of institutional settings that are of lower democratic quality and/or that hinder democratisation to proceed. An institutional blockage is thus created (→*WP4, 5, 6*). EMBRACE studies empirically how institutions (as regards the three dimensions of democracy) are negotiated in the domestic arena, how external actors contribute to these domestic negotiations and whether and to what extent institutions are created that advance or block further democratisation (→*WP4, WP 5, WP6, WP7*).

EMBRACE expects that specific preferences and constraints on the domestic and the external side contribute to creating institutional blockages, for example the absence of experience with democracy, a lack of transparency in political decision-making, the existence of high levels of corruption or the existence of high levels of polarisation between political parties. Cultural habits might be used to drive the de-democratisation or autocratisation agenda further (→ *Cross-cutting issue Culture in Action*).

4.3.3   Structural blockages

Structural blockages mean constraints to be found in the structural context in which political decision-making takes place. Structures constrain, but to not determine the behaviour of political actors. They influence actors' preferences, they provide options for political choice (Swidler 1986) and they inform about the power resources available to political actors (Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens, and Stephens 1992). Depending on the situation in which they emerge, structural constraints can turn into structural blockages to democratisation if they are not managed well or if they are intentionally exploited to create another blockage to democratisation. EMBRACE expects to find structural blockages in the administrative, socio-economic, geographical, cultural or geopolitical context in which democratisation takes place.

Administrative context: EMBRACE is sensitive to the capacity of the state and its public administration to manage and implement political reforms in a beneficiary country (Ziaja, Grävingholt, and Kreibaum 2019; Tikuisis and Carment 2017; Carment and Samy 2017; Thies 2015; Andersen et al. 2014; Soifer 2013; Besley and Persson 2009). States with strong

administrative capacity can extract resources, deliver public services, and control the legitimate monopoly of the use of force; states with weak capacity fail to perform well in these dimensions. In principle, a state is neutral in terms of the political regime it serves: a capable, professionalised, well-trained public administration can serve well either a democratic or an authoritarian regime. It can be expected that the more professionalised, stable and effective a state is, the higher is its capacity to manage reform demands and to absorb financial assistance provided by external actors. If reform demands are of democratic nature, it can be expected that the likelihood of democratisation increases with higher levels of state capacity, and vice versa, if reform demands are of authoritarian nature. A blockage might occur if public administration is confronted with reform demands of contradicting nature.

Socio-economic context: EMBRACE is sensitive to the level of socio-economic modernisation achieved in a EUDP beneficiary country in which democratisation takes place. Following the reasoning of modernisation theory, one of the few relatively unchallenged theorems in the social sciences, higher levels of socio-economic development enable democracy to flourish, while lower levels of socio-economic development can, but do not necessarily, produce obstacles to democratisation (Lipset 1959; Diamond 1992; Lipset 1993; Przeworski et al. 1996; Przeworski 1991b; Przeworski and Limongi 1997) Furthermore, social equality and ethnic homogeneity are conducive to democratisation while sharp social inequalities compounded by ethnic divisions are likely to contribute to de-democratisation (Tomini 2018; Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev 2023).

Geographical context: EMBRACE is sensitive to the five different regions in the European neighbourhood, namely Eastern Europe, Southern Caucasus, Western Balkans, Middle East and Northern Africa. Countries in each region share common trajectories of (de-)democratisation and autocratisation based on specific relations between the state and (sub-groups of) its society that have been shaped by spatial boundaries. Geography influences spheres of power within and between states, fuelling existing or inciting new conflict over territory, identity and nationality, questioning existing or creating new boundaries. The better the management of conflicts over territory, identity and nationality, the easier it is to democratise a political system (and vice versa). Geographical proximity matters as discussed above. The likelihood of democratisation in a country that is surrounded by democracy-friendly regimes increases whereas de-democratisation, violent conflict, and war in the neighbourhood decreases the likelihood of democratisation to take place.

Cultural context: EMBRACE is sensitive to the values, norms, beliefs and attitudes as well as the formal and informal cultural rules that constrain and shape individual behaviour, influence the internal cohesiveness of a society, and mark collective experiences with political power. Culturally informed values and beliefs can incite new political conflict, but they can also help to moderate conflict. Culture provides a toolkit from which political actors take political strategies and tactics to inform their actions (Swidler 1986). The cultural toolkit is a collection of cultural resources that people draw on to make sense of their experiences, to communicate with others, and to build relationships. People draw on their cultural toolkit to develop

strategies of action that allow them to navigate complex social situations, negotiate power dynamics, and achieve their goals. Cultural tools are not fixed or static but are instead constantly changing and adapting to new circumstances. Swidler (2001, 43-107) argues that people are not passive recipients of culture but are active agents who selectively use cultural tools to interpret and make sense of the world around them and pursue their interests. Culture provides people with capacities and symbolic materials to organise the strategies of action according to their end goals in each situation (Swidler 2001, 92-93). In the Eastern neighbourhood, communist and socialist legacies continue to influence political decision-making to this day, whereas the Southern neighbourhood is characterised by colonial legacies in an Arab cultural context. Whether and to what extent these cultural contexts are conducive to democratisation and how EUDP needs to account for existing cultural toolkits still needs to be investigated (→ *Cross-cutting Issue of "Culture in Action"*).

Geopolitical context: EMBRACE factors in the investigated countries' relations with the EU as well as with other major powers and international organisations (→*WP7*). Such power relations strengthen political actors in the domestic arena, impact coalition formation and thus influence decision-making. Geopolitics includes a dimension of geo-economics, as trade, natural resource distribution and development cooperation create economic dependencies that likewise influence domestic decision-making on issues of democratisation. The higher the leverage of external authoritarian actors and the stronger their alliances with domestic authoritarian actors, the greater the de-democratisation effect on levels of democracy.

EMBRACE studies these contextual factors. It assumes that the structural context can be conducive to democratisation, but it can also produce blockages that political actors need to deal with if they wish to further advance democratisation. EMBRACE hypothesises that structural conditions can become blockages to democratisation if not addressed effectively by domestic and external actors or if exploited on purpose.

4.4 Summary hypothesis on blockages to democratisation

Behavioural, institutional and structural blockages can be found inside the domestic arena of a EUDP beneficiary country at its state or sub-state level, it can be found at the regional level or at the supranational level, and it can be found inside the EU, within EU bodies and EU member states. **EMBRACE hypothesis: If not managed well, behavioural, institutional and structural blockages negatively influence the outcomes of political decision-making and lead to stalled political processes. Blockages are not necessarily naturally given; at times they are constructed and exploited by political actors. Some actors may actively fight to get over them, while others may be interested in perpetuating blockages for individual or collective profit.**

4.5 Episodes of political closure

In episodes of political closure, blockages can exemplarily be studied. In a situation of closure, the window of opportunity for more substantial political change closes and change becomes increasingly less likely. The every-day of political decision-making continues within the frame of existing political institutions strengthening an institutional status quo. In the worst case, a political deadlock is created. In a situation of deadlock, opposing parties are in a state of inaction or neutralisation resulting from the opposition of equally powerful uncompromising persons or factions. Typically, such a situation is conducive for authoritarian strongmen who capture the situation and take authoritatively decision arguing that this might be for the greater benefit. The strongman promises to get over the blockage within the proper political process of decision-making (for example in the parliament) through authoritative executive-centred decision-making (→*WP5, WP6*).

In EMBRACE, episodes reflect a shared, theory-driven periodisation, employed as a methodological tool for the empirical-analytical comparative analysis in EMBRACE. Comparing episodes of political closure and episodes of opening (see also section 6.4) allows to identify commonalities and differences in the constellations of relevant factors to explain the persistence and the overcoming of blockages to democratisation. It is sensitive to identify small-scale shifts, either in direction of a closing (e.g. a law that is not passed, a person that is nominated for candidature to a political office, a protest event could not take place, and the like) or an opening (e.g. a law is passed, a person is nominated for candidature to a political office, a protest event could take place, and the like).

5   Assumptions on democratic opening

5.1 Democratic opening as political change

Democratic opening is a specific form of political change. In general, political change effects one political institution or a set of political institutions. Political change can mean moderate or substantial change in a policy field or the entire political system. Policy change is the process of modifying existing policies or creating new ones to address current problems or situations. It can range from incremental to major changes up to governmental or even regime change (Bennett and Howlett 1992). Adapting from Streeck and Thelen (2005), one can differentiate two dimensions of political change: the process through which an opportunity for change occurs (that is either incremental or abrupt) and the result of the negotiations among politically relevant actors over change (that is foremost institutional continuity or foremost institutional discontinuity). Combining these two dimensions, a matrix is the result that looks as follows (see *Figure 4*):

Figure 4. *Process and result of negotiations on political change*

		Result	
		Continuity	Discontinuity
Process	Incremental	Reproduction by adaption = minor/moderate institutional change	Gradual transformation = substantial institutional change
	Abrupt	Survival and return = no institutional change/keeping status quo	Breakdown and replacement = regime change

Source: Author's compilation, adapted from Streeck and Thelen (2005).

Political change can take any direction, towards more or less political freedom, towards higher or lower levels of democracy, towards more or less authoritarianism. Processes that look as if change is ongoing can also end in keeping the status quo, where no institutional change has actually taken place although political actors negotiated over it. In sum, political change as such is undirected and can also end without a measurable effect on political institutions.

In contrast, democratic political change or, in other words, "democratic opening" is directed. It clearly refers to a political process in which non-democratic, hybrid or authoritarian policies and/or political institutions are changed towards higher levels of political freedom, more democracy, less authoritarianism. Through a democratic opening, the quality of democracy is improved. A democratic opening implies that existing democratic political institutions are further strengthened, or new democratic institutions are implemented while political actors increasingly behave according to democratic rules (L. Anderson 1999; Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010, 2006). The nature of the political system becomes increasingly democratic.

5.2 Classifying democratic opening

Democratic opening can be systematized along three lines: along the scope of political change, (moderate, substantial, fundamental), along the main initiation modus (from the bottom-up or from the top-down; violently or peacefully), and along the main process modus of political change (negotiated, imposed).

Depending on the scope of political change, three types of democratic openings can be differentiated: moderate change means a moderate democratic opening while the principle rules of the game remain unchanged (=minor institutional change); substantial change means a substantial democratic opening, substantially altering political rules towards more democracy (=major institutional change); fundamental change means a regime change as all main political institutions change to implement a democratic political system (=fundamental institutional change/regime change). In the latter, one can speak of a democratic transition, namely a transition from an authoritarian or hybrid regime to a democracy. The three types of democratic opening can be located on a continuum of change whereas moderate democratic opening is a moderate form of political change and regime change is an extreme form of political change while substantial democratic opening hoovers in-between.

Moderate democratic opening is a type of political change that results in changing a political institution towards higher degrees of political freedom without fundamentally changing a broader set of political institutions or the political regime itself (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). This includes, for example, the expansion of civil rights and political liberties, more transparency and accountability of the government, or a moderate increase in the quality of governance. Likewise, opening the space for civil society organisations or liberalizing minorities rights and improving freedom of expression imply moderate policy changes. A political institution is more moderately interpreted and implemented. This type of change aims to alter some political institutions and incorporate some democratic features, while the main political system remains untouched, hence authoritarian or hybrid.

Substantial democratic opening is a type of political change that results in substantial institutional change, hence, deeper reforms. This type of political change substantially alters parts of the political system, below the level of regime change (Levitsky and Way 2010; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Such changes include, for example, carrying out constitutional reforms to create new political institutions or strengthening existing sets of institutions up to constitutional powers such as the legislature or the judiciary. Substantial changes can include the establishment of regular elections and other democratic processes of preference-formation. Substantial institutional change can gradually eliminate authoritarian or undemocratic elements in the political system, for example the establishment of free and independent (social) media. Through substantial democratic opening some fundamental characteristics of the political system are changed towards democracy while others still remain authoritarian. A hybrid political system has been created.

The most extreme form of democratic opening is **fundamental democratic opening or regime change**. This type of political change refers to fundamental changes in the political system that eliminate the existing authoritarian or hybrid political system and replace it by a democratic political regime (Bochsler and Kriesi 2013; Przeworski 1991a; Levitsky and Way 2006; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). According to Arugay (2020), a democratic transition is the process by which a country or society moves from an authoritarian or non-democratic political system to a democratic political system. This process goes beyond a mere institutional change within the political system, but involves various economic, social, and cultural changes effecting the whole of society. On the political side, it includes the establishment of political institutions that guarantee political rights and civil liberties, the creation of a multi-party system, free and fair elections, the rule of law, and an independent judiciary. On the economic side, it includes liberalisation and privatisation to create a market economy. Socially and culturally, it implies the building of a democratic society that respects human rights, promotes freedom and strengthens social justice (Arugay 2020).

Political change can be initiated either by regime insiders (**from the top-down**), by the opposition (**from the bottom-up**) or **a mix thereof**. These modes of transition have different long-term effects on the stability and quality of subsequent democracy, for example through the form of democracy (presidential or parliamentary), the design of political institutions, and electoral systems (majoritarian or proportional). Thus, the question who is involved at which point of the transition process and who dominates these is crucial when outcomes of political change need to be explained (Lambach et al. 2020, 28). Early scholarship has traditionally held that elite-led, negotiated transitions are favourable for the long-term stability of democracy because they involve the most powerful actors in the country and can enshrine elite bargains into political institutions (Rustow 1970; O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986; Linz 1978; Higley and Burton 1988). Recent scholarship hints to the positive effects of nonviolent bottom-up activism on outcomes of democratic opening (Lambach et al. 2020; Dudouet and Pinckney 2021; Bethke and Pinckney 2019; Pinckney 2020). The higher the level of inclusiveness and dialogue-orientation, the more likely is the outcome of long-living democratic institutions. It can be reasonably assumed that **negotiating political change** is more conducive to democratic opening than **imposing political change from above** (e.g. **pacted transition** by political elites) **or the outside** (e.g. **imposed transition** by external forces).

In an attempt to systematize transition modes and accounting for the fact that not all theoretically possible combinations of characteristics do exist in real world terms, Guo and Stradiotto (2018) differentiate four transitional modes to reflect the nature and characteristics of regime change. They add as a relevant category whether the main means employed for bringing up political change are **violent** or **peaceful**. Two modes are violent, two modes are peaceful. The violent modes are called *collapse* and *transition by foreign intervention*, the peaceful modes are called *conversion* and *cooperation* (see *Figure 5*). These four modes are used to analyse the impact of political change on the deepening of democracy, the problems encountered during the process and the relationship between the type of transition and the

resulting democracy. The modes focus on those changes that can be observed within the balance of power between domestic regimes incumbents, the political opposition, and the masses. One mode, namely *transition by foreign intervention* factors in external actors as a (violent) driving force for regime change (Guo and Stradiotto 2018).

Figure 5. Types of democracy transition
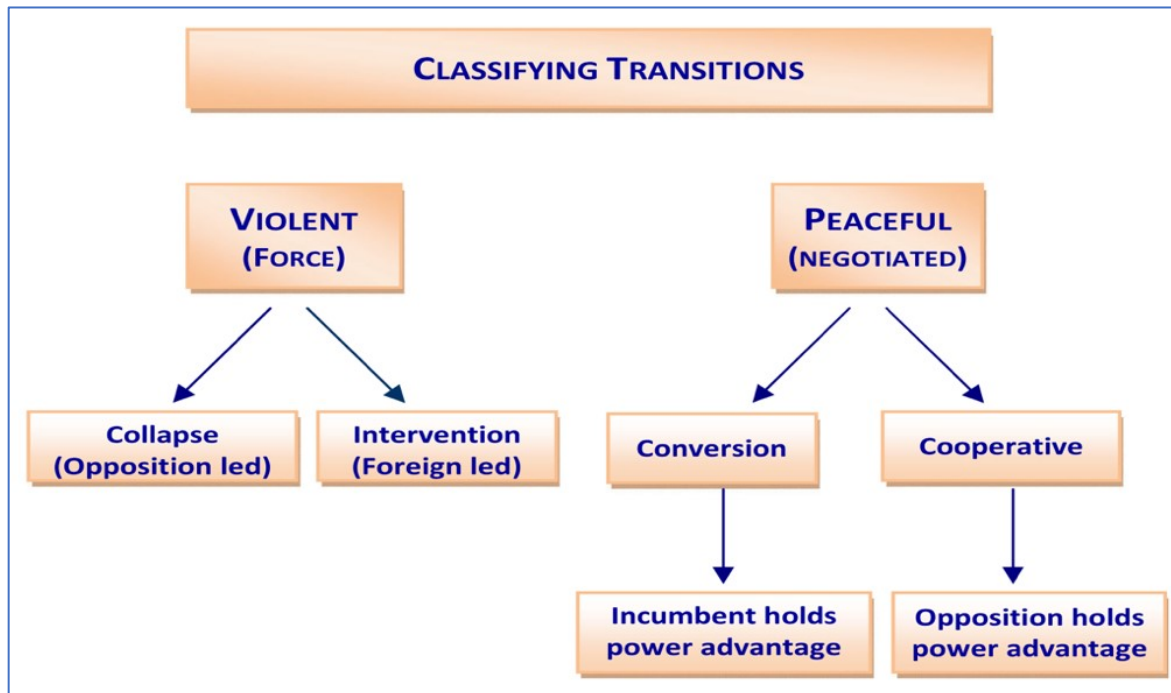
Source: Guo and Stradiotto (2018, 54).

Collapse: In this transition mode, the authoritarian regime collapses or is overthrown because opposition groups take the lead in bringing about democracy. Collapse encompasses transition by revolution or coup d'état where masses overthrow their rules (Thompson 2003). The opposition is in the driver's seat while the incumbent elite is too weak to control the processes or refuses to cooperate. Regime incumbents might miscalculate their power in government and therefore reject demands for negotiation. Regime collapse has occurred during or after the fall of the Iron Curtain 1989/1990 in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Romania as well as in Greece and Portugal in 1974, and Argentina in 1982/ 1983. In the literature, this mode of transition is also referred to as *replacement* (Huntington 1991); *ruptura* (Linz 1990); *breakdown/collapse* (Share and Mainwaring 1986); *revolution/imposition* (Schmitter and Karl 1991); or *reform through rupture* (Munck and Leff 1997)

Transition by foreign intervention: The enforced political reorganisation after a military intervention can be called transition by foreign intervention. External actors (e.g. major powers, ad-hoc coalitions of states, international or regional organisations) send military troops to enforce peace while a civilian component of the military mission seeks to build up a functioning state with democratic elements. This can take place after military victory in an interstate war in form of an occupational regime or as an internationally mandated peace-

mission that is envisaged to oversee a peace process. External actors seek to draft and implement a new constitution with free and fair elections, civil and political rights, power-sharing mechanisms, and the rule of law, to name but a few main objectives. This process can be more or less inclusive, while the will of domestic political elites and their political opposition is reflected to various extents. The democratisation of Western Germany by the Allied Forces in 1945-1949, the enforced (but failed) transition in Iraq 2001 or the peace-implementation process in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1995 can be taken as examples for this transition mode (Kinzer 2007; Fink-Hafner and Hafner-Fink 2009; Aidt and Albornoz 2011).

Conversion: During conversion the elites in power take the lead in democratisation and control the entire process while the opposition remains relatively weak. A faction of the ruling elite might promote an opening to reform from above, or the elites agree jointly upon a multilateral compromise, sometimes with moderate, sometimes even without any input from the opposition. Examples of countries that have transitioned to democracy by conversion include Taiwan from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, and Chile from 1981s to 1990s (Constable and Valenzuela 1988; Barrett 2000; Wong 2003; Chu 2005). Similar categorisations by other scholars are *transformation* (Huntington 1991), *transaction* (Share and Mainwaring 1986), *reforma* (Linz 1990), *pact* (Schmitter and Karl 1991), and *reform through extrication/revolution from above* (Munck and Leff 1997).

Cooperation: Political change occurs through joint action and cooperation between (parts of the) incumbents and opposition groups. Typically, within the incumbent regime, a split among the elites emerges that opens up a room for negotiations. While the hardliners stick to the status quo, the reform seekers are willing to negotiate the terms of transition with the political opposition (Huntington 1991; Higley and Burton 1989; Przeworski and Limongi 1997). A united opposition even more successfully can negotiate a pact with the reform-willing incumbents to the advantage of the opposition. In 1989, Poland and Hungary followed the transition mode of cooperation. Scholars also have called it *transplacement* (Huntington 1991), *extrication* (Share and Mainwaring 1986); *reform through transaction* (Munck and Leff 1997), *pact* (Schmitter and Karl 1991), *reform from below* (Munck and Leff 1997) or nonviolent *transition by negotiation and dialogue* (Dudouet and Pinckney 2021; Lambach et al. 2020).

Although helpful to classify modes of democratic transition, Guo and Stradiotto (2018) fail to systematically count in **the influence of external actors** in all four types of democratic transition. In fact, nowadays, external actors are involved in all sorts of (violent and peaceful) processes of domestic political change including democratic transition, as external actors support democratisation from the outside through various (more or less intrusive) means of democracy promotion negotiating scope and substance of reform with domestic political actors. External actors are engaged as **peace makers**, **democracy promoters**, **state builders**, **observers of peace processes or elections**, among other roles. They provide financial or technical assistance, give policy advice or security guarantees.

5.3 Ideal type democratic opening versus real world democratic opening

In a pioneering study, M.C. Wilson et al. (2022) examine democratisation during different liberalisation periods through large-n analysis. The authors identify the beginning of a period of political liberalisation, trace its course, and classify episodes as successful or as different types of failures. Based on the Episodes of Regime Transformations dataset (ERT) created from V-Dem data, they analyse 383 liberalisation episodes from 1900 to 2019 to reveal new insights into democratic waves. They demonstrate that while several established covariates are valuable for predicting final outcomes, none explains the onset of a liberalisation episode. The approach allows to identify "true zeros" that never liberalised and compare them to different types of liberalisation processes. The paper focuses on the conceptualisation of liberalisation episodes and describes a comprehensive sample of all liberalisation episodes in autocracies from 1900 to 2019. The authors analyse o the covariates of episode onset and outcome. Wilson et al. (2022) identify three types of failures: Stagnation and stabilisation of an authoritarian equilibrium, return to a closed autocracy, or a brief, minimal democratisation in which basic elections take place. A period of liberalisation can also lead to a successful transition to democracy. Thereby, the study notes that meeting the criteria for successful liberalisation is critical to ensuring a transition to democracy. Furthermore, the investigation demonstrates that the political intentions of actors in the early stages of liberalisation are generally unobservable, and the outcome is highly uncertain. The study emphasises that successful democratisation is not necessarily the result of intentional political reform, but often the result of coincidence or unintended consequences.

Following the line of reasoning of Wilson et al's study and earlier findings, democratic opening is never linear and mostly connected to setbacks and failures. Political actors can reverse political change in all areas of interests at any time. Particularly the consolidation of democracy in young democracies that have recently changed their political system is not guaranteed (Shin 2021; Göbel 2011; Svolik 2008). And even mature democracies can lose scores on the quality of democracy scale. A reversal of political change up to processes of de-democratisation and re-autocratisation is possible at any stage and at any time of the reform process (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Acemoglu and Robinson 2013; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Local resistance against externally induced democratic openings can likewise be expected (Kappler and Richmond 2011; Mac Ginty 2011). Total failure and collapse of democracy might become less likely over time, to the extent that domestic political actors increasingly except the new democratic rules and begin to play according to them (Merkel 2010). However, failure and non-consolidation of democratic institutions can never be totally excluded. The breakdown of democracy in the Weimar Republic 1933, the dismantling of Venezuela's democracy under President Hugo Chávez in the 2000s or the subversion of democratic institutions in Georgia, Hungary, Nicaragua, Peru, the Philippines, Poland, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Ukraine by elected leaders themselves provide striking examples (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 4-5).

6   An analytical model for the study of democratic opening

6.1 Path dependency and choice points

Following the literature that seeks to explain political change, democratic opening understood as political change towards higher levels of democracy can be the result either of long-term, evolutionary processes or sudden events, short-term crises or shocks.

Cerna (2013) uses two theories to explain policy change – the theory of path dependency that is routed in historical institutionalism and the theory of advocacy coalitions that is informed by behavioural theories. The theory of path dependency assumes that institutions are immobile, making it difficult to change policies, and that major change requires a critical moment, a choice point or window of opportunity. The theory of advocacy coalitions, on the other hand, focuses on the role of advocacy coalitions in promoting policy change. These coalitions form around core ideas and interests, and policy change results from interactions between external events and the success of ideas in the coalitions.

Both approaches can easily be combined as it can be reasonably assumed that, first, advocacy coalitions can create choice points where institutional change becomes more likely. And second, it can be assumed that advocacy coalitions have more leverage to influence the outcome of a choice point situation if they are well-organised, dispose of resources and can successfully from coalitions with other relevant political actors.

The literature on historical institutionalism (see Wolff 2013 for an overview) suggests to think in terms of "critical junctures" or "choice points" where actors have at certain moments in time more freedom to choose among different political alternatives while being (more or less) constrained by prior institutional experience and existing structural conditions. Once the relevant political actors have made their choice, the window of opportunity for political changes closes again and institutions become more stable.

Following Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, 341), causal arguments in this strand of literature postulate "a dual model of institutional development characterised by relatively long periods of path-dependent institutional stability and reproduction that are punctuated occasionally by brief phases of institutional flux – referred to as critical junctures – during which more dramatic change is possible. The causal logic behind such arguments emphasises the lasting impact of choices made during those critical junctures in history. These choices close off alternative options and lead to the establishment of institutions that generate self-reinforcing path-dependent processes." Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, 342) refer to Pierson (2004, 135) in arguing that "[j]unctures are "critical" because they place institutional arrangements on paths or trajectories, which are then very difficult to alter."

Collier and Collier (1991) and Mahoney (2001) probe the concept's meaning and develop methodologies for making use of the concept as a model of change. Collier and Collier (1991, 27-29) consider "path dependent" patterns of change where the outcomes during a crucial transition establish distinct trajectories of events and thereby produce distinct institutional

legacies. Mahoney (2001, 6-7) applies a more actor-centred concept. For him, "[c]ritical junctures are choice points when a particular option is adopted from among two or more alternatives. These junctures are "critical" because once an option is selected, it becomes progressively more difficult to return to the initial point when multiple alternatives were still available." In Mahoney's perspective, critical junctures are "moments of relative structural indeterminism when wilful actors shape outcomes in a more voluntaristic fashion than normal circumstances permit" (Mahoney 2001, 7). Yet, "[n]ot all choice points represent critical junctures. [...] Critical junctures are specifically those choice points that put countries (or other units) onto paths of development that track certain outcomes – as opposed to others – and that cannot be easily broken or reversed. Before a critical juncture, a broad range of out-comes is possible; after a critical juncture, enduring institutions and structures are created, and the range of possible outcomes is narrowed considerably" (Mahoney 2001, 7). Critical junctures produce enduring legacies what Mahoney (2001, 8) explains in terms of the historical institutionalist argument of path dependency: "Choices during critical junctures make path reversal difficult because they lead to the formation of institutions or structures that tend toward persistence and that cannot be easily transformed." Hogan (2005, 6) adds that "for the change that takes place to constitute a critical juncture, as opposed to an incremental change, this change must be significant, swift, and have an enduring legacy [...]."

A major concern for the use of "critical junctures" as an analytical concept is the extent to which actors can freely choose among institutional alternatives during a critical juncture respectively the extent to which actors even in a situation of relative indeterminism are constrained by underlying political, social, economic or cultural structures. Whereas Carpoccia and Ziblatt (2010) attribute considerable importance to the moment of contingency in critical junctures to understand specific developments in singular cases, Møller (2013, 2) brings those structural patterns to mind that can explain the striking regularities of transition processes in the European space in the 19th and 20th century. Structural factors constrain actors' choices much less in Carpoccia and Ziblatt's reading of critical junctures than in Møller's. Møller (2013, 9) even argues, that Carpoccia and Ziblatt with their focus on particular events would "systematically ignore deeper structural constraints when accounting for outcomes in a comparative context." Pierson (2004, 15) completely challenges the idea that actors make rationally use of their choice options during critical junctures. Instead, he argues that institutional change "should often be seen as the by-products of social processes rather than embodying the goals of social actors". Unintended consequences add to this: "Even where actors may be greatly concerned about the future in their efforts to design institutions, they operate in settings of great complexity and high uncertainty. As a consequence, they will often make mistakes" (Pierson 2004, 15). Hence, scholars disagree on how much freedom of choice actors dispose of at a critical juncture.

Bringing these reflections together, a critical juncture for political change can be defined through three elements: '(1) a "generative cleavage" (Hogan 2005, 6), some kind of crisis, or some combination of structures, processes and events that destabilise an existing

political/institutional/structural setting; (2) a moment of "relative structural indeterminism", constituting "choice points" (Mahoney 2001, 6-7), "during which more dramatic change is possible" (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 341); and finally (3) an "enduring legacy (Hogan 2005, 6), i.e. an outcome "that cannot be easily broken or reversed" because of "enduring institutions and structures" (Mahoney 2001, 7) or be-cause of "self-reinforcing path-dependent processes" (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 341; Collier and Collier 1991, 9; Pierson 2004, 134).

A generative cleavage can mark a choice point for more substantial institutional change. Transition researchers hint to substantial socio-economic and/or political crises that can cause a political legitimacy crisis of the incumbent government (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1989; Merkel 2010). Additionally, elections and regime leader succession can put an autocratic regime into political and institutional crisis (Höglund, Jarstad, and Söderberg Kovacs 2009; Mansfield and Snyder 2005; Snyder 2000; Escribà-Folch 2013). Conflict researchers name violent conflict or foreign occupation (Grimm 2010; Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995; Colaresi 2004; Walter and Snyder 1999) as situations that can trigger moments of structural indeterminism where the social contract is broken and socio-economic structures are turned upside down. Typical events that open a window of opportunity for regime change are the death of a dictator, public mass protest against the old regime or public elections that oust the (authoritarian leader) from power, or an elitist coup d'état that leads to the overthrow of the old institutional order, a ceasefire in a violent conflict and negotiations on a peace agreement, or the defeat in (inter-/intra- state) war (Merkel 2010; Lane 2008; Werner and Yuen 2005).

The most dramatic institutional outcome of a choice point is regime change, either from authoritarian to democratic rule (democratic transition) or, vice versa, from democratic to authoritarian rule (democratic breakdown). Institutional choices below the level of regime change can likewise substantially alter the institutional setting of a political system to effectuate democratic opening. However, one should not forget that also institutional continuity can be the outcome of a critical juncture, when the relevant political actors consider different institutional options, but decide not to substantially change the political institutions after all (for an overview see *Table 1*).

Table 1. *Critical junctures and political change*

Generative cleavage or substantial crisis	Moment of structural indeterminism/choice point	Enduring institutional legacy
• Substantial socio-economic and/or political crisis • Substantial loss of legitimacy of incumbent government • Violent conflict/war (intra-state conflict/war due to underlying economic, social, religious, cultural, political cleavages or inter-state war due to conflicting geopolitical, security or territorial interests) • Foreign occupation	• Massive social turmoil (transcending social structures) • Incumbent ousted from power (due to massive public protest, elections, peace agreement, …) • Death of a dictator (without regulation of succession) • Elitist coup d'état • Ceasefire; peace negotiations • Defeat in (inter-/intra-state) violent conflict/war • Regime collapse ⬇ Several institutional alternatives are available and negotiated by politically relevant actors (politicians, business leaders, military leaders, warlords, religious authorities,…) with/out external support/oversight	• Regime change: Democratic transition (from authoritarian to democratic rule) or democratic breakdown (from democratic to authoritarian rule) • Major institutional change (without changing the regime type) • Minor institutional change • No reform (stabilisation of political regime in status quo; political reform in the near future unlikely)

Source: Author's compilation.

6.2 Factors conducive to democratic opening

According to the transition literature (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1989; Przeworski and Limongi 1997; Merkel 2010), several factors can be conceptualised that are conducive to democratic opening. These factors can be summarised in three bundles of factors: actors/behaviour-related factors, institutions/political systems-related factors, and structures-related factors. Among the actors-related factors the role of domestic political elites and masses as well as pro-democratic external actors need to be considered. Among the institutional factors prior experience with democratic institutions need to be named. As structural factors, which are conducive to a smooth transition process, scholars list a high level of socio-economic modernisation, the existence of a functioning well-governed effective state (aka stateness), the existence of a political community (aka finished nation-building and fixed territorial boarders) and the absence of war and violent conflict (aka peace) (Rustow 1970; Linz 1978; Merkel 2010; Guo and Stradiotto 2018).

None of these factors is alone sufficient to drive a successful democratic opening. These factors are also not mutually exclusive, but successful democratisation require a favourable combination of these factors. These factors are described in a positive value that is conducive

for democratic opening. It needs to be noted that any factor can also take a more negative value that is non-conducive to democratic opening and thereby turn into an obstacle for democratic opening up to creating a blockage. This would again increase the likelihood for a relapse into political closure.

6.2.1   Actors-related factors

The bundle of actors related factors sheds light on the relevant domestic political actors (or in other words, "domestic elites"), civil society actors, the broader public (in the transition literature frequently portrayed as "the masses" or "popular uprisings" as called in the contentious politics literature), critical journalists, the absence of interference by non-constitutional powers, and the support of external actors through means of democracy promotion:

Relevant domestic political actors: Domestic political actors are the main drivers of democratic opening. Their mindset needs to be pro-democratic, and they need to be experienced and willing to drive democratisation further in order to successfully incite pro-democratic institutional change. The more united relevant political actors are on the issue of democratic opening, the higher the likelihood that they jointly implement pro-democratic institutional changes. Scholars in the field of comparative political party research clearly hint to the fact that political parties are power seekers interested in gaining and keeping access to political power (Bawn 1993; Benoit 2004, 2007; Müller et al. 1999). Following this line of thinking, Mancebo (2019) shows for the case of South Africa that during post-Apartheid transition, the political parties foremost sought to maximise their share of seats in parliament and influenced the process of redesigning electoral rules accordingly. The stronger the political party and the better their capacity to coordinate with like-minded political counterparties, the higher their ability to influence the reform outcome (Mancebo 2019). As representation in parliament is one of the key factors for influencing political decision-making in a representative democracy, creating a more inclusive political system in which historically marginalised groups have the right to participate is important for a transition to be successful. However, the success of such reforms ultimately depends on the willingness of political actors to prioritise the common good over their interests. If the opposition becomes united, builds broad opposition alliances, and campaigns for pro-democratically oriented political leaders winning the support of the electorate, democratic opening can become sustainable. Political parties need to integrate a broad range of political preferences from to prevent selective co-optation and anti-democratic mass protest (Szmolka 2022).

Support of pro-democratic civil society and the broader public: Civil society organisations that support democratic opening can become important sources for reform ideas and a reservoir for political staff (Levitsky and Way 2005). As multipliers, they can contribute to convince the broader public of the advantages of democratic opening. Mass mobilisation demanding democratic reform in the early stages of a transition is perceived by most scholars

as conducive for democratic opening as it puts pressure on relevant domestic political elites to reform the political institutions and open room for more freedom. However, whether it is also required in later stages of the process, is unclear. Some argue that during the reform negotiations among political elites, more moderation of the masses is required as an overheated public debate might hinder democratisation and increase societal polarisation that is non-conducive for democratic opening (Levitsky and Way 2005; Erdogan 2020; Merkel 2000). Others argue exactly the opposite, namely that sustained mobilization is required to forge relevant political actors to compromise on institutional reforms and to implement them effectively (Pinckney 2020).

Critical, but supportive media/journalists: A democracy profits from critical, but system-supporting journalists. They function as multipliers for information on reform processes, keep a critical eye on the behaviour of domestic political actors/the political elite and drive further reform debates through informative input about reform options and procedures. They hint to critical issues as a "watchdog" and bring in a perspective from outside of the political system. Journalists contribute to keep attention high on issues of democratic opening (including the attention of external, pro-democratic funds supplying actors) and influence the political agenda to further democratic opening. Media attention can become a critical factor for the decision of external actors to give more aid to countries involved in processes of democratic opening as it can signal situations in which democracy assistance is most likely to succeed (James M Scott, Rowling, and Jones 2020).

Forbearance of non-constitutional powers: The transition literature particularly hints to military or business elites whose interference can substantially damage the process of democratic opening. In some cases, however, such actors have proven to become stability anchors that guarantee the survival of democratic institutions. Overall, non-constitutional powers should keep to forbearance in order not to delegitimise elected political powers or the newly implemented democratic institutions (Hecan and Farhaoui 2021; Boese et al. 2021; Croissant, Eschenauer, and Kamerling 2018).

External actors as democracy promoters and supporters: Through political, economic and/or military power, external actors exert leverage over domestic political actors that drive democratisation. With democracy promoting instruments including political dialogue, expert advice, financial and technical resources, conditionality based on incentives (such as economic and political cooperation agreements, access to a free trade area, or a perspective for membership in regional and international organisations) and the thread of punishment (such as the withdrawal of aid or economic sanctions), pro-democratic oriented external actors can support democratic opening from the outside (Burnell 2000; Grimm and Leininger 2012). They can support overseeing the implementation of a peace process (Call and Cousens 2008; Paris 2002, 2004) and/or agree to give guarantees that new institutional rules are respected by relevant political actors (Hartzell and Hoddie 2003, 2007). To give an example, Nowack and Leininger (2022) suggests that democracy assistance of external actors can be effective in stopping attempts to circumvent presidential term limits, as they have protected democratic

standards in African and Latin American countries between 1990 and 2014. The democracy-promoting effect of leverage is positively increased through the existence of political, economic, social and cultural linkages (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2006, 2010). This includes connections between political actors, civil society organisations, and political movements to their counterparts and other pro-democracy oriented organisations in established democracies (Erdogan 2020; Keck and Sikkink 1998).

Absence of rivalling powers: As already elaborated above, authoritarian regimes increase their global influence through authoritarian diffusion and (maybe) intentional autocracy promotion. For democratic opening, on the contrary, it is conducive if these influences are contained or neutralized by more attractive offers of democracy promoting external actors.

6.2.2   Institution-related factors

Prior experience with democratic institutions: The broader prior experience with democratic institutions, even if they have failed, the better for the young democracy. Political actors have made experience with democratic processes, have learned what works, how to form coalitions, how to draft and implement laws, how to convince supporters for specific reform alternatives (Boese et al. 2021).

Institutionalised mechanisms for cooperation: During critical junctures where more institutional change is possible, it is conducive for democratisation if there are inclusive institutionalised mechanisms for dialogue and negotiation between the different political actors laying the ground for cooperation between incumbents and opposing political actors. Processes of transition where inclusive dialogue arenas allow the contenders to cooperatively agree on the reforms facilitate institutional outcomes at higher levels of democratic quality (Dudouet and Pinckney 2021).

Smart institutional design: The newly created political institutions should reflect societal heterogeneity while not being drafted in a way that any sort of ethnical antagonism can block the political process (Rothchild and Roeder 2005). Cemented power-sharing mechanisms in Bosnia and Herzegovina are a negative textbook example for failed institution-building in this regard (Jung 2012; Gromes 2009). The institutions should be inclusive and allow for a broad range of political preferences for being heard in the process of political decision-making. Furthermore, the democratic system should include a system of checks and balances as for example strong judicial constraints on the executive power, to embed the core regimes of democracy in a functioning rule of law system that allows democracy to survive (Boese et al. 2021). Finally, the political system should include a set of self-government practices to assure the participation of larger shares of the society in decision-making as inclusive processes increase satisfaction with and trust in political institutions as interests and opinions of citizens are taken seriously (Guo and Stradiotto 2018). Participation also has a positive influence on those citizens that dispose of an a- or anti-democratic mindset. Following Zorell and van Deth

(2020), actual participation stimulates understanding democracy and offers the opportunity to nurture more liberal democratic orientations among sceptical citizens.

Winning public support for and trust in new political institutions: Political actors and political parties need to play according to the newly institutionalised rules and publicly support democratic norms in words and behaviour (Meléndez and Kaltwasser 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). This creates trust into the new political system and creates legitimacy on the input side of the political decision-making process. Furthermore, perceptions of individual influence and government openness are associated with high levels of public trust. Transparent, fair and inclusive public administration is conducive to citizens' trust in public administration what contributes to overall trust in democracy (Schmidthuber, Ingrams, and Hilgers 2021).

6.2.3 Structures-related factors

Socio-economic modernisation: Higher levels of socio-economic welfare do not guarantee successful democratic transition, but they increase the chance for democracy to survive (Doorenspleet 2004; Epstein et al. 2006; Hadenius and Teorell 2007; Przeworski and Limongi 1997; Lipset 1959). According to modernisation theory (that remains despite all efforts relatively unchallenged in its main assumption) argues that higher levels of development create a context that is conducive for democracy: it allows larger shares of the citizenry to profit from welfare gains, increasing the enthusiasm for democracy and opening the room for criticising authoritarian behaviour of the government and those executive policies that limit civil and political freedom (Guo and Stradiotto 2018; Bilgenoğlu and Mengüaslan 2020). Societies that show higher levels of development (measured by human development indicators such as life expectancy, child mortality, income, gender inequality and literacy) perform better in democratic transition. It can be reasonably assumed that better living conditions support political mobilisation and empower people to demand for democratic rights (Rapanos 2018).

Existence of a functioning well-governed effective state/stateness: An effective state delivers all means necessary to keep and maintain political power and exert a legitimate monopoly of the use of force. The latter allows to control the coercive means to constrain (violent) state and non-state actors and keep power-seeking security actors such as the military or the police in their barracks (Hecan and Farhaoui 2021). Effective state institutions effectively implement legislative decisions, and extract resources that can be distributed among the members of the society. This allows political incumbents to satisfy material and non-material needs among the population and to create legitimacy on the output side of the political system through positive socio-economic performance.

Existence of a political community/finished nation-building and fixed territorial borders: The existence of a political community in which the belongingness to one nation is uncontested is

conducive to democratic opening. In contrast to societies in which ethnic conflict prevails, in societies with finished nation-building it is already clarified who has the right to participate in political decision-making. It is certified who has what kind of citizen rights including the right to vote and the right to be selected for political office (Linz and Stepan 1996b). The absence of conflict over territory, fixed territorial boundaries and the unity of territory and nation increases the likelihood of democracy to survive, as critical issues of nation-building do not need to be solved. Finished nation-building prevents political actors to play the ethnic card and to exploit issues of national identity for partisan political purposes; such behaviour could disrupt society with negative consequences for democracy (B. Anderson 1991).

Peace/absence of war and violent conflict: Likewise, the absence of violent conflict and war is conducive for democratic opening as political actors have time to think about institutional design instead of fighting with violent means for power. (Cronin 2010; Mason et al. 2011; Brancati and Snyder 2011; Call and Cousens 2008; Mukherjee 2006).

6.3 Summary hypothesis on democratic opening

Various behavioural, institutional and structural blockages at the state or sub-state level, at the regional level and the supranational level, might prevent democratic opening to happen. Research is very clear in hinting to the fact that not all good things go together in episodes of democratic opening. Relevant political actors might simply be overwhelmed with the massive amount of reform requirements and demands. **EMBRACE hypothesises: A substantial set of behavioural, institutional and structural blockages need to be overcome to generate opening. Due to the scope of required tasks and the existence of potential blockages, minor political change is more likely than substantial political change and substantial political change is more likely than regime change. Most likely is the outcome of blurred democratisation where reforms in some policy areas or dimensions of democracy are implemented while others clearly lack behind.**

6.4 Episodes of opening

EMBRACE investigates episodes of opening, understood as moments in time where political change becomes more likely. Episodes of opening can be understood as critical junctures where political reforms, policy choices, political institutions, or other democratic claims are debated, reconstituted, or transformed. In EMBRACE, episodes reflect a shared, theory-driven periodisation, employed as a methodological tool for the empirical-analytical comparative analysis in EMBRACE.

Transition studies are inconclusive about the best periodisation of political change. The literature focusing on processes of regime change from authoritarian to democratic rule differentiate three phases of transition: Phase 1 is called "political liberalisation" up to the end of the old regime, Phase 2 includes the institutionalisation of democracy, and Phase 3 covers

the consolidation of democracy (Linz and Stepan 1996a; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). In many empirical cases it has been, however, difficult to clearly differentiate the beginning or endpoint of the three phases. Hence, Przeworski and Limongi (1997) suggested to differentiate only two phases of regime change: the transition to and the survival of democracy (see *Figure 6*).

Figure 6. *Phases of democracy transition*

Model 1: Three phases of democratic transition

| End of old regime (collapse, erosion, liberalisation) | Institutionalisation of democracy | Consolidation of democracy |

Model 2: Two phases of democratic transition

| Transition to democracy | Survival of democracy |
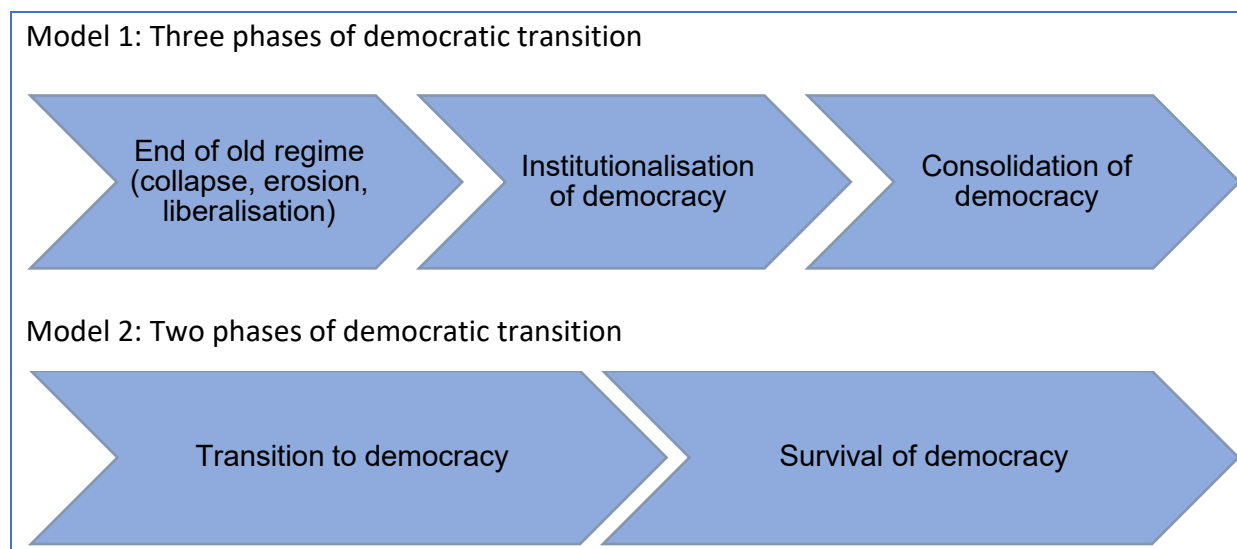
Sources: Model 1 adapted from Schmitter and O'Donnell (1989) and Merkel (2010);
Model 2 adapted from Przeworski and Limongi (1997). Author's compilation.

Both concepts share the idea that in an ideal world "consolidated democracy" is the outcome of a democratic transition. It needs to be clearly noted that – rarely if ever – any transition case has followed this path perfectly. To the contrary, hybridity and authoritarian reversals have more than once been the actual outcome of critical political junctures (see also M.C. Wilson et al. (2022) summarized above). As a consequence, the analytical concept of transition phases has received a lot of scholarly criticism, particularly for being too "teleological" to be able to describe and understand well the complexities and idiosyncrasies, the back and forth of democratic transition (Merkel 2010). It also does not well in capturing small scale democratic gains that characterise many processes of political change in the context of popular uprisings (→*WP4*), in the context of elite contests in hybrid and authoritarian regimes (→*WP5*) or in the context of peacebuilding after violent conflict (→*WP7*).

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the idea of phases in democratic transition as described above can serve to analytically identify "episodes" of opening where institutional change is more likely to happen. These episodes serve several analytical functions. They allow the researcher:

(1) to identify in which stage of political change a political regime is in and what the prospects for further opening are.

(2) to analyse those factors that are conducive to or, *ex negativo*, that block further democratic opening.

(3) to systematise the typical configurations and reconfigurations that shape and that are shaped by processes of political change.

Configurations means the constellation of actors and alliances, political institutions and structures as well as the distribution of power, and the discursive and symbolic frameworks that shape processes of political change and that are shaped by such processes. Reconfigurations hints to the shifts in these constellations at specific choice points.

EMBRACE suggests putting forth a concept of reconfigurations in institutional, relational, and discursive-symbolic terms that represent the fluidity, ambiguity, and contingency in processes of political change as triggered by popular uprisings (particularly investigated in →*WP4*), by conflicts among blockage and contesting elites over hegemonic discourses in authoritarian and hybrid regimes (→*WP5*), by conflicts over societal peacebuilding in post-war societies (→*WP6*), or the geopolitical competition and its implications for democratisation (→*WP7*). Reconfigurations create possibilities for action and interaction that can be conflictual and/or cooperative, leading to either political openings or blockages. The reconfigurations, hence, act as both structures shaping the parameters of action but are also shaped/re-shaped by interactions, implying a relational ontology between structure and action.

Reconfigurations are in this sense the processes that underlie the episodes or the specific instances of small-scale democratic change that were either successfully achieved or blocked. These reconfigurations are, moreover, shaped and reshaped by the strategic interactions within the episodes themselves.

In the next four sections 7 (→*WP4*), 8 (→*WP5*), 9 (→*WP6*), and 10 (→*WP7*), it is detailed how the different WPs within EMBRACE make use and adapt the here presented framework to analyse the identified relevant conflicts in the European Neighbourhood and how they seek to respond to the WP-related sub-questions within EMBRACE's theory framework.

7   Democratic policy shifts after political uprisings (WP4)

7.1 Research questions and objectives

The purpose of *WP4* is to explore how small-scale democratic gains occur as a result of the reconfigurations that popular uprisings produce; and, conversely, to identify blockages to such small-scale gains during moments of uprising or their aftermath. Here, the term "gain" refers to contextually-meaningful changes in institutional, policy, organisational, discursive, and/or ideational terms that contribute to democratisation processes while "blockage" refers to behavioural, institutional, and/or structural conditions that prevents gains from being achieved. In addition, the WP seeks to investigate how EUDP either contributed to these changes or indeed was irrelevant, and what EUDP could have done to facilitate change or alleviate blockages.

WP4 starts from an identified puzzle: in cases of mass popular uprising in authoritarian or hybrid regimes – regardless of overall outcome – why do bottom-up social/political forces achieve some democratic small-scale gains while others are blocked? The point of departure is the popular uprising, which are conceptualised within Dobry's (1983, 1986) frame of multisectoral mobilisation. *WP4* understands popular uprisings as moments of high fluidity and "desectoralisation", leading to new configurations that are amenable to certain democratic gains being made (and, importantly, also create new blockages). Here, the term "configurations" refers to the constellation of actors and alliances, institutions, structure and distribution of power, and discursive and symbolic frameworks. *WP4* focuses specifically on small-scale changes that are not purely top-down or executive led, and can include: actual policy shifts, new legislation or rights, or, where such types' gains were not possible, the creation of a new oppositional coalition or new practices.

Given this, the analytical focus of *WP4* is the investigation of the configurations stemming from the popular uprising, and how these are linked to gains/blockages. It is thus asked:

(1) At the macro-level, what are the forms of fluidity and strategic contingency in institutional, relational, and discursive terms that emerged during and in the aftermath of the popular uprising under consideration?
(2) At the micro-level, what are the specific reconfigurations emerging out of the popular uprising that underlie the episode(s) of democratic gain/blockage under investigation?
(3) How did EUDP interact with these reconfigurations at the macro- and micro-levels to either lend support to democratic gains or inadvertent support to blockage?
(4) What are the expectations among democratic social and political forces in terms of EU support and what types of EUDP, from their perspective, are most needed?

With these research questions in mind, *WP4* has three overarching objectives: It seeks to contribute to the research on the relationship between popular uprisings and democratisation by shifting the analytical focus away from top-down and institutional explanations of success or failure of democratic transition to the micro-level, bottom-up relational and interactionist

dynamics within smaller episodes. Through comparative analysis, it seeks to identify similar mechanisms across the case studies to generate generalisable knowledge on reconfigurations post-uprising and the relationship to small-scale democratic gain/blockage. And it seeks to make policy recommendations to the EU regarding which EUDP policies are most effective under different configurations.

These objectives will be fulfilled with the empirical comparative analysis of the following political uprisings: *Bulldozer Revolution 2000 (Serbia), Rose Revolution 2003 (Georgia), Cedar Revolution 2005, YouStink Movement 2015, and 2019 Revolution (Lebanon), 2011 Revolution (Tunisia), Revolution of Dignity 2014 (Ukraine), Mass Protests 2015 (North Macedonia), Velvet Revolution 2018 (Armenia), Hirak Movement 2019 (Algeria), Electoral Protests 2020 (Belarus).*

7.2 Literature review and theoretical framework

While the literature on the relationship between mass popular uprisings and democratisation has been somewhat limited, the state of the art of *WP4* can be identified in three strands of research. First are studies situated within democratic transition theory, which treat uprisings as discrete events or critical junctures that trigger democratisation. Here, emphasis is placed on explaining outcomes, with focus largely placed on structural features of the political system and elite dynamics and, to a lesser extent, bottom-up dynamics in democratic transition and the role of civil society. Second are statistical analysis seeking to identify the mechanisms that explain the positive relationship between non-violent uprising and democratisation in terms of outcome and durability of democracy. Third is the research within the field of contentious politics, which, drawing on social movement theory, emphasises political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes that allow for opponents to promote democratisation through means outside formal institutional politics.

We identify several gaps in the research that *WP4* seeks to address. A point of consensus across the democratisation literature is that there is no single path that countries follow in their transitions; rather, democratic development is an extended and non-linear process. Indeed, analyses of democratisation in more recent waves, including the various cases under investigation here among others, indicate a 'two steps forward, one step back' phenomenon. Given this, it is argued that there is a need to further theorise the moment of uprising and its aftermath not as a discrete event that either produces or fails to produce democratic transition but rather as a continuous, ambiguous, politically contingent process.

Emphasis is placed to the dynamics within the uprisings themselves. This involves exploration of the relational and interactionist dimensions of political change beyond the moment of mass mobilisation itself. Analytical attention is placed on smaller-scale shifts in order to understand mechanism of opening and blockage to develop new theoretical insights into the contingent and cumulative nature democratisation.

7.2.1   Mass uprising as triggers for transitions

Historically, the transitions literature has focused on investigation of the elite-level, looking in particular at pacts and authoritarian regime-type, even when popular uprising was present. The earlier literature on Latin American transitions, for example, assigned little importance to mass popular mobilisation, emphasizing instead longer-term processes occurring at elite levels, and in particular splits within military governments (Geddes 1999). Likewise, Bratton and van der Walle (1997), in their investigation of East European and African cases, found that while popular protest was the primary cause of elite negotiation, indicating that transition was instigated from below, it was calculation of personal political survival by sitting elites that explained when openings actually occur.

Literature stemming from the 2000s onward, has placed renewed emphasis on the role of mass uprisings and democratic transitions. This literature views uprisings as triggers, critical junctures, or the moment of democratic opening. Given this, the analytical framework has focused attention primarily on path dependency and the various institutional features and constellation of actors that explain outcomes in the aftermath of uprising. Emphasis has still largely remained on the top-down level and the capacity of authoritarian regime insiders and supporter to resist, repress, or co-opt popular demands to explain both shorter-term and longer-term outcomes with regards to democratisation. Analyses have, as such, focused on the impact of critical events on elite behaviour and calculations, arguing that democratic transition post-popular uprising is largely related to the margins of manoeuvre of elites and the ability to whether challenges (Hale 2005; Beaulieu 2014; Kalandaze and Orenstein 2009).

Nonetheless, this strand of the research has not exclusively considered the top-down dimensions of post-uprising democratisation. Attention has also been paid to the trajectories of actors who were able to produce political processes of democratic change in the first place and their capacity to shape the transition process, with particular emphasis placed on the institutional position of bottom-up actors in the transition process (Fishman 2017; Pilati et al. 2021). This has included analysis of the institutional ruptures that are produced by mass uprisings, and how democratisation is consolidated in the aftermath of revolutions through new patterns and opportunities for civic and political participation (Fernandes 2015; Stefes and Paturyan 2021; Bishara 2020; Yousfi 2018).

This body of literature has largely confirmed the institutional dimensions and role of elite margins of manoeuvre in determining the degree of democratisation in the aftermath of popular uprisings. However, such approaches, as Volpi and Gerschewski (2020) argue, are based on temporalities of uprising that are detached from those of transition processes. In addition, the comparative value has perhaps been challenged by the distinctive differences in typology of uprising as well as the tendency to focus comparative work at the sub-regional level. *WP4* seeks to add to this by proposing a conceptualisation of uprising as social and political process, and by extending analysis across the five subregions of EMBRACE.

7.2.2   Statistical analyses and mechanism identification

Large-n studies have been deployed to assess the positive relationship between non-violent, mass popular uprising and the onset as well as durability of democratic transition (Karatnycky, Ackerman, and Rosenberg 2005; Johnstad 2010; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011), lending insights into possible mechanisms at play. Celestino and Gleditsch (2013) find that non-violent mass uprisings are more effective in destabilizing authoritarian regimes as they are able to mobilise larger swathes of the population by decreasing the costs to participation, allow for greater tactical innovation, and create increased opportunities for elite defection that can in turn disperse power and increase incentives for compromise and concessions. Bayer, Bethke and Lambach (2016) show that non-violent popular uprisings are more favourable to the durability of a democratic transition as they produce an organisational culture that is favourable to democratic survival. The authors find, moreover, that longer-term democratic consolidation depends less on external support for elite-led top-down transitions than on broad support from civil society actors, contradicting the findings of Kalandaze and Orenstein (2009). Likewise, Lambach, Bayer, Bethke, Dressler, and Dudouet (2020) go further on the relational dynamics between citizens, government, opposition, and security forces in the aftermath of nonviolent revolutions. Drawing on statistical analysis and case studies in Chile and Benin, they argue that the mechanisms during the transition itself, including the role of protest activists in decision-making and negotiations, help explain democratic consolidation. Lachapelle, Hellmeier, and Lürhmann (2021) find that democratic transition in the aftermath of mass uprising is possible when protestors pro-democracy forces keep unity, build inclusive political agendas, and maintain pressure on elites to continue in the democratic process.

In general, the research indicates that non-violent popular uprisings are conducive to democratic outcomes as they favour transitions that encourage political participation, the protection of freedoms and civil liberties, and lead to the emergence of new democratic political cultures. However, as Pinckney (2018) point outs, the relationship between concepts of uprising, democracy, and transition are complex and more research needs to be done to untangle the mechanisms behind them. For example, the variation in outcomes has been under-investigated, and thus we do not have sufficient knowledge about why some mass popular uprisings lead to democracy and others do not. In attempting to solve this puzzle, Dudouet and Pinckney (2021) placed emphasis on the negotiation process between the end of mass uprising and the transition, looking in particular at dialogue and negotiation processes and the level of inclusiveness therein to determining democratic prospects.

While these approaches have provided considerable evidence that mass popular, non-violent uprising has a positive relationship to democratisation and have theorised different possible mechanisms to explain these outcomes, statistical analysis is only able to confirm observable implications without deepening the understanding to the mechanisms themselves. As Celestino and Gleditsch (2013) admit, the relationship between specific actors and events, power dynamics, and incentives for elite concessions in favour of democracy are not explored. *WP4* specifically focuses on relational and interactionist dynamics.

7.2.3   Contentious politics and democratisation

The investigation of the links between popular uprisings and democratisation has also been treated in the study of contentious politics. Situated within social movement theory, this strand of research places emphasis on meso-level dynamics of mobilisation and the processes of interaction within the political sphere in order to identify mechanisms explaining outcomes. In the earlier literature, explanations highlighted features of the political context, including the structure and divisions among elites, capacity for repression, the existence of external allies, the discursive field of claim-making, among others. Later works extended the analytical framework to include the organisational and ideational dimensions of contention and specifically those of social movement actors (Giugni, McAdam, and Tilly 1998). McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow (2001) emphasise the processual and interactionist dimensions. Within this approach, they identify four causal mechanisms of democratisation stemming from popular uprising: cross-class coalition formation, central co-optation of intermediaries, dissolution of patron-client networks, and brokerage.

Adding new empirical cases, Tilly and Tarrow (2015) further this meso-level and interactionist analysis of the mechanisms explaining social movement outcomes in relation to democratisation. Maintaining the primacy of political opportunity structures in their analytical model, the authors include the regime types and the axes capacity and democracy to explore a regime's ability to regulate collective action and the space and rights given to the citizenry. As they explain, such an approach allows for assessing how episodes of contention reshape political relations, institutions, opportunities, and repertoires of action in feedback loops that lead to either increased democratisation or de-democratisation. Similarly, in his study on cycles of protest and the impact on democratisation in Serbia under Milošević, Vladisavljević (2016) theorises a dialectic relationship between competitive authoritarianism and popular protest, arguing that regime type facilitates both the organisational and motivational capacity for mobilisation and, in turn, that popular uprisings shape elite interests and institutional frameworks, which can ultimately lead to democratic opening. As he argues, popular protest has a longer-term and cumulative 'constitutive' influence on regimes.

The contentious politics approach has also led to innovations in theory of revolution and the link to democratisation (Allinson 2018). Della Porta's (2016) work seeks to explicitly address the interactionist and relational dimensions of social movement action, democratisation, and revolution, and is perhaps among the approaches that most directly corresponds with *WP4*. Della Porta (2016) problematises the seeming lack of success of mass mobilisation to effectively produce democratic regime change by moving away from viewing outcomes in absolute terms to instead emphasizing the relational dimensions of political transition. She posits that changes take place in encounters between social movements and authorities in a processual manner that takes into account countermoves, allies, and reciprocal adjustments. Democratic openings thus present structural features that change the realm of possible actions and interactions by influencing resource availability, affective and cognitive processes, and relations between elites and challengers, which in turn influence institutional dimensions.

As she argues, mass uprisings against autocratic regimes may thus still have democratic effects even when protestor demands are not met, what she refers to as 'eventful democratisation.' These democratic effects, as she theorises, can be measured in the higher or lower degree of development of citizen rights in the post-mobilisation period, including recognition of rights to protest, institutional access, and sensitivity to social justice, as well as the cumulative acquisition of new material and immaterial resources and ideational frames that can contribute to further democratisation in a longer processual timeframe.

WP4 is most closely situated within the contentious politics research strand, given its relational and interactionist approach and emphasis on the processual as opposed to discrete nature of uprising. *WP4* places attention on the mechanisms behind small scale democratic shifts and blockages and not democratisation at the systemic level. In this way, *WP4* moves the analysis away from the transition process itself and the path-dependent macro-structural features it induces.

7.2.4   EU Support to bottom-up democracy movements

The research on the EU's role in supporting popular uprisings and activism by bottom-up actors has been covered within the civic resistance literature. Much of the literature has focused on the reasons, both institutional and ideological, for the EU's positioning on the sidelines of pro-democracy social movements, non-violent resistance, and various forms of activism (Hollis 2012; Youngs 2014; Stephan, Lakhani, and Naviwala 2015). What the literature demonstrates is that EU support to pro-democracy movements and civic activism often comes after the fact, once a revolutionary period has ended and democratic transition has been an institutionalised outcome (Lutsevych 2013; Shapovalova and Youngs 2014).

Moreover, this research, often bridging the academic and policy worlds, is proscriptive in nature, providing policy recommendations to external actors such as the EU and the ways in which they can support nonviolent democratic uprisings and civic resistance. Chenoweth and Stephan (2021), for example, argue that long-term financial and technical support can helped build pressure from below and a 'demand' for democracy among the citizenry; mitigate regime repression and maintain nonviolence; and create incentives for regimes to enter into mediation or negotiated transitions. These findings are further echoed by Rodriguez Prieto (2022), who demonstrates the value that external support to popular uprisings could hold: preventing violent escalation, mitigating repression, protecting civic space, and facilitating conflict transformation while fostering sustainable peace.

Yet, the literature also advises that external support is not universally helpful to the maintenance and success of such movements. In cases where regimes have a high degree of internal structural support and autocratic narratives supported by social norms and values, such as Belarus, eternal support to democratic popular movements may in fact be mostly unable to produce profound systemic change or transitions (Korosteleva 2012). Chenoweth and Stephan (2021) find that direct funding has few generalisable effects on movement characteristics or outcomes, and can perhaps even lead to demobilisation or attrition.

Perkoski and Chenoweth (2018) find that external support can also undercut a movement's ability to garner high-level defections by providing fodder to regimes in their claims that popular uprisings are provoked by external meddling, and even correlates with increased repression. Likewise, donor funding is most useful when it is coordinated, flexible, and when agenda-seeking claims cannot be levied. Indeed, much of the scholarship highlights how external support to local activists and networks can have unintended negative effects by leading to 'NGOisation' and the de-politisation of movements to meet donor requirements and agendas (Arda and Banerjee 2021; Herrold 2022), and exacerbating tensions and inequalities and leading to fragmentation (Jalali 2013; Naimark-Rowse 2022).

This research provides significant insight into the wide variety of support that external actors may provide to civic activists and social movements engaged in popular uprisings against autocratic regimes (Dudouet 2015) as well as the consequences of such support in terms of movement outcomes and durability. However, certain gaps can be identified, including the lack of sufficient focus on the timing of external interventions within episodes of contention as well as disaggregated analysis of different categories of support. Indeed, Jackson, Pinckney, and Rivers (2022) indicate that external aid is often undertaken haphazardly and without insights drawn from either scholarship or activist practice. *WP4* will contribute to this literature by exploring the specific tools of EUDP and how these interact with the mechanisms under investigation here, as well as the perspective of bottom-up actors regarding which forms of intervention and support would be useful or, on the contrary, would be harmful to achieving small-scale democratic gains.

7.3 Research expectations and hypotheses

The central hypothesis of *WP4* is that instances of mass uprising produce high fluidity and strategic contingency in institutional, relational, and discursive terms that lead to new configurations that are amenable to certain democratic gains being made and, importantly, also create new blockages.

The central hypothesis can be broken down into several assumptions. First, it is assumed that the contextual dynamics of ambiguity, comingling, and contingency do not cease when mass mobilisation ends. Rather this fluid context continues in a larger time frame during post-uprising transition periods while institutional features, relational dynamics, and discursive/normative frameworks are still in flux. Post-uprising periods also share features of continued mobilisation and claim-making by bottom-up actors, albeit on a smaller scale, implying contentious politics processes continue in the aftermath of a mass uprising. This builds off much of the conclusions from the contentious politics literature cited above, and in particular the work of Della Porta, along with broader efforts to reconceptualise uprisings and post-uprisings periods as structurally undetermined. This reconceptualisation implies that democratic outcomes are not directly linked to structural features; rather, the uncertainty of uprisings and transitional processes opens a range of possible choices at specific choice points

and, hence, outcomes that become available (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; see also section 6.1).

Second, it is assumed that reconfigurations in terms of institutional arrangements, relational dynamics, and discursive-symbolic processes at both the macro- and micro-levels produce the possibilities for both democratic opening and blockage, depending on the combination of reconfigurations and strategic interactions. This notion of the unstable, contingent, and enabling/constraining nature of reconfigurations with regards to political change finds echo in the work of Tilly (2006) and his understanding that the uncertainty before a new political order stabilises allows for increased margins of political manoeuvre and processes of change.

Third, following Jasper (2011, 2015), it is assumed that the reconfigurations are not fixed but rather are shaped through the strategies and interactions of agents in ways that are both unpredictable and mutually constitutive.

With these assumptions in mind, *WP4* can preliminarily outline several expectations. First, *WP4* expects to find as most relevant configurations that explain democratic shifts/blockages:

(1) The level of elite contestation in the redistribution of power. We expect that when elites are pacted and largely anti-democratic, the possibility for democratic policy shift as pushed by bottom-up actors is smaller. Conversely, when there are splits among elites and a distinct pro-democratic position is united, the possibility for democratic policy shifts as pushed up by bottom-up actors is larger.

(2) The positionality of the bottom-up actors vis-à-vis the general public (and specifically those engaged in the episodes under consideration in the research). We expect that the degree to which they benefit from popular support and are able to maintain legitimacy for their tactics increases their ability to achieve democratic shifts.

(3) The collective actions frames utilised by bottom-up actors for the episodes under consideration, alongside counter-frames as proposed by elites. We expect when issues are framed as either a threat to elites or a threat to societal norms and values, or identity threats, the capacity to achieve democratic shifts is reduced.

Second, *WP4* expects that strategic interactions between bottom-up actors and elites will influence the above three configurations. More precisely, we expect that where claim-making is occurring (in institutional venues, the street, the court system, etc.), the nature of alliances with external actors that are established (oppositional elite figures, outside brokers, EU officials, etc.), and the response of elites (co-optation vs. repression) will shape and reshape the configurations in ways that can either create blockages or shifts. We also expect that strategic interactions *within* the camps of bottom-up actors pushing for democratic gains, and in particular in-fighting or dispersion, will significantly negatively affect their success, as in the case of Belarus.

Finally, with regards to EUDP, we expect that the interactions with the configurations will be largely limited to the macro and institutional levels, with less engagement in bottom-up ideational, organisational, and strategic processes. We further expect that civil society, if it

joins efforts with international partners, can insist on and later safeguard the democratic reforms: when political elites have enough space for sabotaging reforms due to the 'softness' of the EU and other international donors multiplied by the inability of civil society to secure wide support for the reforms, the chances of failure significantly increase.

7.4 WP4's overall theoretical argument

The overall theoretical argument of *WP4* is that small-scale democratic gains and blockages are not causally linked to the overall outcome of mass uprisings themselves but rather are related to the institutional, relational, and discursive fluidity that they produce. This fluidity creates reconfigurations at both the macro- and micro-levels, themselves shaped by strategic interactions, and represent the mechanisms explaining how democratic shifts are either gained or blocked in uprising/post-uprising periods.

The theoretical point of departure for *WP4* is the popular uprising itself and its processual, relational, and interactionist fluidity and ambiguity. Like Dobry (1986, 1983), WP4 theorise political crises as processes of cross-sector co-mobilisation that are highly fluid, heterogeneous, and unpredictable. Co-mobilisation means the simultaneous deployment of collective action by different sectors of the polity. Mobilisation is understood as strategic moves that produce a range of effects, including the release of new resources and the opening of new political opportunities, within the broader political arena. In this sense, different sectors – including both oppositional groups as well as authorities – make different strategic moves that have an effect both on the context as well as on one another. These strategic moves are determined by the various calculations made by each actor, themselves mediated by interpretations of the shifting spatio-specific cultural and institutional contexts and the evolving dynamics of the crisis itself (Dobry 1983, 399-400). In this sense, strategic moves are highly contingent and can fluctuate radically within very short periods of time.

Popular uprising and its aftermath, before the political order becomes refixed, thus represent a disruption to normal sectoral logics that maintain separation of socio-political networks and limit the range of possible actions and outcomes. Multisectoral mobilisation is instead characterised by fluidity in social relations along three dimensions: the unification of social space, the enlarged tactical interdependence of sectors (understood as socio-political networks and social groups) and structural uncertainty (Dobry, 1983: 409). The unification of social space interferes with independent sectoral logics, thereby effecting strategic calculations. In this way, sectors may make strategic moves that do not correspond with their sectoral logics in force during routine times. Tactical interdependence of sectors, for its part, de-cloisters resources thereby widening those available to each sector. In addition, tactical interdependence changes the calculations of strategic moves: each sector thus no longer operates according to their sectoral logic alone, but also takes into account the strategic moves of other sectors (interpreted, nonetheless, through their subjective lenses and not in any 'objective' sense). This creates thus a complex chain of moves/counter-moves that are

both unpredictable and evolve in relation to one another and the effects they produce on social space and the crisis itself. Finally, structural uncertainty for its part erases the points of references and perceived parameters that in routine times bound actors' actions and the range of possible political outcomes. This co-occurrence in time and space of various streams of mobilisation thus should not be interpreted as a synchronisation of sectoral logics but rather a result of the political crisis itself, meaning that different struggles, negotiations, and possibilities co-exist with unpredictable outcomes.

In conceiving popular uprisings as processes of multisectoral mobilisation, the theoretical argument of *WP4* puts forth a concept of reconfigurations in institutional, relational, and discursive-symbolic terms that represent the fluidity, ambiguity, and contingency that are produced by popular uprising (see also Ouaissa, Pannewick and Strohmaier (2021)). Reconfigurations create possibilities for (inter)action that can be conflictual and/or cooperative, leading to either political openings or blockages. The reconfigurations, hence, act as both structures shaping the parameters of action but are also shaped/re-shaped by interactions, implying a relational ontology between structure and action.

Drawing on insights from the breadth of social movement theory as well as prior work cited above, the WP assumes that reconfigurations that act to both enable and block political change occur along a number of different dimensions and exist at both the macro- and micro-levels. In institutional terms, this includes the distribution of power between elites and the masses, the capacity for and use of repression, and the social pacts/authoritarian bargains that determine lines of political insiders/outsiders. In relational terms, this includes coalitions or alliances of social and political forces, the emergence of new or redrawing of existing socio-political networks and their positionality vis-à-vis the general public and elites, and the external allies/opponents. In discursive terms, this includes normative and symbolic frameworks, collective action frames, and shared narratives.

The conceptual framework of *WP4* understands mechanisms not as sequences of action leading to causal outcomes but rather patterns of configurations that explain the complexity of relationships between constituent parts of a complex unity. Mechanisms involve the interconnected dynamics linking macro- and micro-configurations and the manner in which strategic interactions reconstitute them.

Finally, the conceptual framework understands that while EUDP only interacts with the macro- and micro-level reconfiguration, the interaction dynamics also work in these directions. In other words, the framework argues that EUDP is itself shaped through these interactions in what can be understood as nonetheless longer timeframes and via institutional learning processes (for a visualisation of the argument see *Figure 7*).

Figure 7. Reconfigurations after popular uprisings
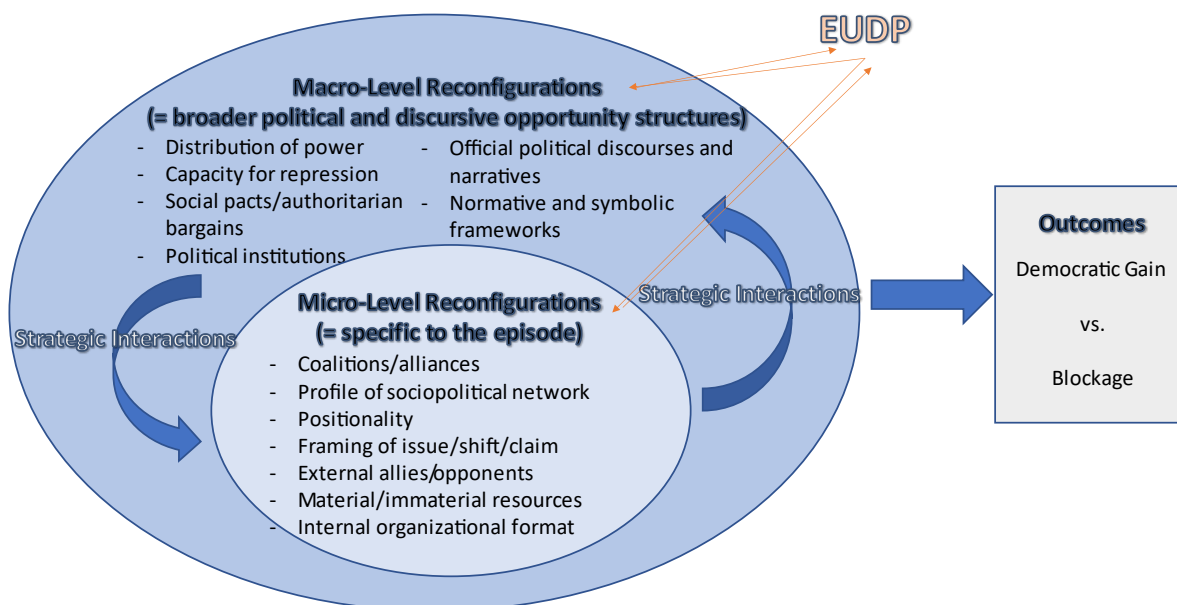
Source: WP4 authors' compilation.

8   Democratisation in authoritarian and hybrid regimes (WP5)

8.1 Research questions and objectives

WP5 focuses on democratisation and economic modernisation in authoritarian and hybrid regimes. The aim is to identify and examine democratic blockages and (restricted) political opening in authoritarian and hybrid regimes. Case studies include episodes of deadlock and opening in Belarus, Azerbaijan, Serbia, Algeria and Lebanon. The analysis in *WP5* draws on an innovative approach to understand authoritarianism and authoritarian practices and tendencies, based on Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Gramsci 1971, 1973). The approach focuses on issues of legitimacy, and that ideology and other legitimisation discourses play an essential role in attempts of authoritarian governments, or governments employing authoritarian practices, to secure legitimacy.

WP5 understands blockage elites as dominant, hegemonic elites that block democracy and democratic will-formation, including the active attempt to prevent, suppress or eliminate contesting actors. Contesting actors articulate values, ideas and norms that compete with the ruling elites' dominant discourse and ideology. Contestation exists not only in countries with vibrant civil societies, but also in the very restrictive context of autocratic regimes, where struggles over 'defining reality' may occur among regime elites and civil society elites. Particular attention is given to how contesting actors understand emancipation from the ruling blockage elites and how they understand democracy, so as to avoid superimposing any particular notion of emancipation and/or democracy.

WP5 seeks to examine the conditions under which contesting actors succeed or fail in attempts to challenge, fracture or break the hegemonic consensus of the blockage elites, including their legitimating narratives and practices. Key research questions are:

(1) What are episodes of (restricted) opening/ successful attempts of contestation of hegemonic 'blockage' elites in the last decade, and in particular episodes where actors have attempted to question, contest, fracture or break the hegemonic consensus created pertaining to blockage elites, including their legitimating narratives and practices? In which instances have these attempts succeeded) or failed?

(2) How and under what conditions have contesting actors successfully attempted to question, challenge, fracture or break the hegemonic consensus of the blockage elites, including their legitimating narratives and practices?

(3) How and for what reasons have contesting actors failed in attempts at challenging the blockage elites?

(4) How do EU external discourses/ practices 'unintentionally' resonate with/ reinforce the status quo and legitimacy of blockage elites, including their legitimating narratives and practices, and how can EUDP support factors and actors that attempted to question, contest, fracture or break the hegemonic consensus pertaining to the blockage elites?

The following episodes have been selected in *WP5* to empirically analyse political opening and closure: *Azerbaijan (success/opening: January 2019 - September 2020; failure/deadlock: October 2020 – today); Lebanon (success/opening: October 2019 - December 2019; failure/deadlock: 2020 – today; Belarus (failure/deadlock: 2014 Maidan, 2015 election and protests in 2017-2018; successful contestation of hegemonic discourse: 2020 elections and repression 2020-2022); and Serbia: opening: Lithium extraction in Western Serbia by Rio Tinto 2019-2021; political closure: austerity package 2014*.

8.2 Literature review and theoretical framework

The state of the art of *WP5* concerns itself with the blockages and openings in authoritarian and hybrid regimes, and specifically with the literature on the promotion of democracy and autocracy, with a focus on external actors on the one hand, and the study of domestic politics on the other hand.

8.2.1   External actors

When it comes to the external dimension of blockages and openings, the focus of research lays on the so-called 'black knights' and 'white knights', whereby black knights export and promote autocracy and white knights do the same for democracy. This export is done, largely, by powerful countries such as the United States, Russia, China, or by blocks of states such as the EU (Ambrosio 2009; Levitsky and Way 2010; Tolstrup 2009).

However, the assessment of those countries is not black and white. While the US, as a liberal democracy, might be expected to export democracy, it has not always done so, as is the case in Bahrain (Ambrosio 2009). As might be evident, Russia is mainly seen as a black knight, certainly since the occupation of Crimea and especially since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Indeed, much of the research highlights the impact of Russia on its neighbours (Ambrosio 2009; Levitsky and Way 2010; Tolstrup 2009, 2015). Researchers suggest that Russia too does not only act internationally with the aim of keeping autocrats in power worldwide, but that geopolitical self-interest guide Russia's behaviour vis-à-vis those autocrats (Tolstrup 2014; Natalizia 2019; Kolstø 2021). In a similar vein, the EU also indirectly supports autocracy at times when it chooses to engage with authoritarian leaders in exchange for cosmetic reform (Tolstrup 2014), or to ensure political stability at its borders (BiEPAG 2017; Dandashly 2018), bolstering the resources and legitimacy of the regime. Research indicates that at times democracy promotion reinforces the *status quo* in favour of autocratic incumbents, as is argued in the cases of Belarus (Bosse 2012, 2021; Pikulik and Bedford 2019) and Azerbaijan (van Gils 2020). Democracy promotion may also narrow the space for civil society actors to act (Sander 2023). These findings create the need to research the conditions under which democracy promotion can bring about both blockages and openings in democracy.

8.2.2   Domestic factors

As is shown above, academia is unable to give a definitive answer about the motivations and effects of external actors regarding democracy- and autocracy promotion. Hence, it is worth unpacking country cases and highlighting the importance of domestic factors of autocratic resilience. State capacity provides autocratic regimes with administrative and coercive means to maintain a social contract and to repress dissent once the social contract is breaking down (Gerschewski 2013). However, there is no direct link between state capacity and the longevity of an autocratic regime (Hanson 2018). Indeed, as Kailitz (2013) shows, autocratic regimes which are based on a single party, person, or the military tend to have shorter life spans than democracies, monarchies or highly ideological autocratic regimes, despite the fact the state might be capable of supressing dissent and keeping the population in check. However, there are exceptions to this rule, such as the case of Cuba, among others (Whitehead 2016).

Researchers point to the existence of an 'autocratic toolkit' which autocratic rulers traditionally use to stay in power and maintain the status-quo. First, scholars point to usage of elections and subdued parliaments which give a flavour of democracy or participation of its citizens, but are in reality subordinate to the authoritarian ruler or rulers (Levitsky and Way 2002). This allows authoritarian leaders to co-opt oppositional forces, as well as civil society to work *for* them rather than *against* them (Astapova et al. 2022; Gerschewski 2013; Trantidis 2022). Naturally, surveillance, threats, physical violence and judicial action are part of the more repressive, cruder toolkits at the disposal of autocratic regimes (Morgenbesser 2020).

Third, Tolstrup (2014) introduces the concept of 'gatekeeper elites'. These are domestic elites which, following the logic of Levitsky and Way's (2006) linkage and leverage model, can choose to increase or decrease the density of linkages between themselves and external actors. As such, the key to democratisation or a further strengthening of autocracy, and therefore the blockages or openings, lie with the domestic elites. These domestic elites can be political elites, economic elites and civil society elites. On the surface, the political elites seem the most important, and they are the focus of much of the research already done into the preferences and motivations of elites to democratise or retain the status-quo. A closer look is needed, however, at the economic elites, in line with the economic policy tools of the EU and EMBRACE, and the civil society elites, which are the main actors in bringing about a domestic drive for democratisation. This is supported by research on the nature of the economy and autocracy. In some instances, authoritarian governments can use the economy to reinforce their position, such as in the case of Belarus and Azerbaijan through rent distribution (Alieva and Pikulik 2022), restricting welfare and benefits for those considered as oppositional forces (Escribà-Folch 2012) and providing economic stability (Ahmed 2012). However, at times, domestic economic actors can also be the driver for political liberalisation (Sklar 1996).

Building on a solid scholarly basis to explain autocratic resilience, *WP5* identifies a gap in the literature: Tying into recent contributions on democratic resilience (Merkel and Lührmann 2021; Boese et al. 2021) – as opposed to autocratic resilience – there is a need to study the

legitimation of the regime by its elites, and the narrational struggle against this legitimation. In doing so, *WP5* supplements the previously identified explanations of the influence of external actors, the capacity of the state with its autocratic toolbox, and the gatekeeper elites' preferences. *WP5* identifies the context, practises, influence and ways in which external actors can contribute to successful and unsuccessful contestations of the hegemony of blocking elites by contesting elites. This can lead to the creation of a 'democratic toolkit' – or "resistance playbook" (Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev 2023, 133), which will be valuable for EU and national policy makers seeking to enhance democracy in the European neighbourhood (*see also the Cross-cutting issue of Culture in Action*). The following section focuses on the concepts of legitimisation and its contestation.

8.2.3 Legitimisation as the missing link

One source of legitimacy derives from the performance of the state in providing stability and services. Legitimacy in democratic states and supranational organisations derives from input and output legitimacy. In the case of democratic countries, output legitimacy – the quality of decisions and the impact on citizens' lives – is considered highly important. This is supplemented by genuine input legitimacy, whereby citizens have various opportunities to "participate in political decision-making processes directly or indirectly through representatives" (Strebel, Kübler, and Marcinkowski 2019). In autocratic societies, input legitimacy is limited, if not faked as shown above. While autocratic regimes such as Cambodia, Zimbabwe and Egypt, among others, do hold elections, they are not living up to the standard of democratic elections. This is countered by creating the appearance of legitimate elections, by practises such as instating election observation groups which are essentially controlled by the government (Debre and Morgenbesser 2017), or seeking friendly states to validate the election outcomes (Tolstrup 2014). As such, the (re)election of autocrats becomes a ritual in which the outcome and high share of votes for the autocrat boosts the legitimacy of the regime. Apart from autocratic regimes, *WP5* also analyses hybrid regimes. As with democracy promotion, the countries in the case studies are neither fully democratic or autocratic, and come with a wide variety of characteristics (Bogaards 2009; Wigell 2008; Way 2015b; Mufti 2018). These regimes also have varying tools of legitimation at their disposal, although the active usage of these tools varies from case to case (Mazepus et al. 2016). The continued studying of hybrid regimes shows that they are ever-present in today's world (Levitsky and Way 2010, 2020), making the case for their analysis in *WP5*.

Next to this fraught input legitimacy, autocratic or hybrid regimes provide, with varying degrees, output legitimacy. As von Soest and Grauvogel (2017) observe, the providing of social services by the state apparatus legitimises the state. This is especially true in post-Communist societies. In other cases, such as Lebanon and Algeria, elites are able to stay in power in large part because of the 'common sense' that the political order - however faulty - at least maintains stability and is considered better than the status quo ante (Werenfels 2009). At

times, the state cooperates with civil society, allowing for a clearly defined framework in which civil society organisations are allowed to operate and to provide services which the state cannot, or is unwilling to provide (Astapova et al. 2022). This so-called co-optation creates an atmosphere of openness and provides social services, such as medical services, to the population, thereby legitimising the regime. However, there are limits to co-optation, as the civil society organisations build networks of active citizens, which can be mobilised in times of uprising against the regime. Rather, the regime prefers the population to remain passive and do not engage with politics (von Soest and Grauvogel 2017).

While similarities between authoritarian regimes and hybrid regimes exist, it is important to acknowledge the way they differ as to do justice to the diversity between country-cases within *WP5*. First and foremost, within hybrid regimes, elections are still free, if not always fair (Bishop and Hoeffler 2016). In authoritarian regimes, elections are neither free nor fair. Here, the incumbents often do not shy away from using the autocratic 'toolbox' at their disposal, as opposition figures – the contesting elites – are harassed, arrested or in other ways silenced. Second, media freedom is absent in autocratic regimes, and at times the internet is closed off entirely (Eichhorn and Linhart 2022), while in hybrid regimes, the government does not hold a monopoly on the media landscape, though it is not fully free (Surowiec and Štětka 2020). To echo Balderacchi (2022, 1441), "the freedom and fairness of multi-party elections have persisted as key factors to distinguish non-liberal or problematic democracies from competitive non-democratic regimes and, therefore, as necessary conditions for democracy". Third, hybrid regimes are no full democracies, but in light of the 'third wave of autocratisation' (1994-2017), the "states hit by [this wave] remain much more democratic than their historical cousins", i.e. the classic autocracies (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1108). Consequently, the number of repressive tools at the disposal of incumbents in hybrid regimes is smaller than in autocratic regimes. This should influence the degree in which contesting elites have the freedom, political space and leverage to challenge the hegemony of ruling elites. Selecting cases from hybrid and authoritarian regimes allows to account for these differences.

Conceptually, *WP5* concerns itself with ruling elite attempts to secure consensus so that their rule would appear 'just' and 'natural'. This consensus is theorised in Gramsci's theory of hegemony, where the distinction is made between governance by coercion – which includes repression, domination and terror – and by consensus, or hegemony. This hegemony of ideas belongs to the elites of the regime, who communicate this hegemony through their ideology or cultural practices, thereby securing public consent and consensus on the elites' definition of reality (Gramsci 1973). The focus lies on public communication of ideology, making the status quo appear natural, just and logic (J.C. Scott 1990). This creates the need to analyse the communication of the elites, to unpack the arguments and practises, and to spot episodes of blockage – when the status quo is (re)enforced – or opening – when the status quo is broken, people stop "living the lie" (Havel 1978) and autocratic resilience breaks down.

8.2.4   Hegemonic blockage elites and contesting elites

In Gramsci's writings (1971), hegemonic elites include dominant groups linked to the organs of the state, such as government representatives and officials, the wider state bureaucracy, the military and the police, but also *civil society elites* and intellectuals, including elites associated with trade unions, the media, churches and political parties (Landau 2008, 245). Unlike many liberal theorists, Gramsci does not presuppose that the state and civil society are necessarily antagonistic terms. Rather, they form an integral relationship, in which certain segments of civil society will support rather than oppose the state and the hegemonic discourses of the ruling elites. Civil society elites are seen as important elements in the political system, who, through their directive, organisational or educative functions, articulate and disseminate knowledge. Civil society is not 'romanticised' as a site of 'free-minded and mutually cooperative groups and individuals beyond the state's purvey' (Rodan 1997) that by default contests the dominant legitimising narratives of the hegemonic elites (Dogan 2022, 92). Rather, civil society is seen as a social institution that is both a site of compliance with (and reproduction of) the legitimising discourses of hegemonic elites and a site of contestation in opposition to the hegemonic elites. In line with Gramsci's approach, the key distinction is therefore not between state elites and civil society, but between hegemonic elites on the one hand, and elites contesting the hegemonic elites on the other hand, whereby government elites and civil society elites can be part of the hegemonic elite or of the elites contesting the hegemonic elites.

Gramsci distinguishes two groups within the hegemonic elites, namely the dominant elites linked to the hegemonic status quo, and the so-called 'passive revolution' or 'transformismo' elites. Passive revolution elites include formerly contesting and opposition elites which have gradually been incorporated into the hegemonic elites, in a purposeful attempt by the hegemonic elites to overcome opposition by 'absorbing the enemies' (De Smet 2021, 1083). In other words, an episode of 'liberal opening' involving contesting elites entering the ruling elites' networks may initially appear like a (limited) democratic opening, but would eventually neither mark an opening nor a change in any shape or form as contesting elites get fully absorbed and assimilated into the hegemonic elites. Contesting elites in opposition might also, unintentionally, support the legitimising discourses and practices of the hegemonic elites.

For Gramsci, *contesting elites* articulate and promote values, ideas and norms that compete with the hegemonic elites' dominant discourse and ideology (Landau 2008, 246). Crucially, Gramsci contends that a state's hegemony is never complete. This in turn allows for, or inevitably implies spaces or 'terrain where struggles over meaning and common sense take place' (Sim 2007, 150). This assumption matters, because it recognises that spaces for contestation exist not only in countries with vibrant civil societies, but also in the very restrictive context of autocratic regimes, where struggles over 'defining reality' may occur among regime elites and civil society elites. In this work package, a particular emphasis is placed on examining contestation among regime elites, though considering the integral

relationship between regime and civil society elites, the analysis of episodes should also include civil society elites if and when their involvement is considered critical to the episode.

As the focus of the EMBRACE project is on blockages to democratisation, it is also important to further define the concept of blockage elites, which are conceptualised here as hegemonic elites. In his works, Gramsci (1971, 1973) distinguishes between hegemonic elites linked to the bourgeoisie and capitalist ideology, and a counter-hegemony based on working class culture and the redistribution of economic and political power away from the dominant capitalist classes. In this sense, Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony are more complex and comprehensive compared to the distinction between factors blocking democratisation (blockage elites) and factors overcoming such blockages (pro-democracy elites). Over the past decades, further developments of Gramsci's theory of hegemony have sought to move beyond the economic determinism of his writings (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Many contemporary works drawing on Gramsci have, however, tended to reduce counter-hegemony to 'opposition to existing dominant power and status quo' (Dogan 2022, 1083), based on often implicit normative assumptions about 'opposition' constituting a 'good' or emancipated force by default and turning a blind eye to opposition that contests democratic processes and institutions (Mikuš 2018).

Other scholars have explicitly understood contestation of hegemony in terms of its emancipatory potential and the struggle for democracy and democratic values (De Smet 2021, 1083). Yet, they have often drawn on definitions of democracy as liberal market democracy, elections and formal political rights, neglecting conceptualisations of democracy pertaining to social democratic, welfarist aspirations and including socio-economic rights (Abrahamsen 1997, 151). In this work package, we intend to find a middle-ground between the definitions of contestation as 'anti-capitalist' on the one end of the spectrum, and contestation as 'any form of opposition' on the other end. We understand blockage elites as dominant elites that block democracy and democratic will-formation, including the active attempt to prevent, suppress or eliminate those who articulate values, ideas and norms that compete with the ruling elites' dominant discourse and ideology. Particular attention is given to how contesting elites understand emancipation from the hegemonic blockage elites and how contesting elites understand democracy, so as to avoid superimposing any particular notion of emancipation and/or democracy.

8.2.5   Coercion, hegemony and conjunctural terrain

For Gramsci (1971), political power involves both coercion and consent. Coercion, which Gramsci defines as the 'outer ditch' of the state, involves a variety of measures that a state can take to coerce its population into compliance, including for example measures such as disrupting or censoring access to internet and mobile phone connections, to imposing curfews, censoring the media and the opposition, to using water cannons, rubber bullets or teargas against protesters, to imprisoning torturing and assassinating opposition forces and protesters and employing state security forces and the army to use brute force to crush

protests and the indiscriminate killing of civilians. Hegemony, conceptualised by Gramsci as the 'inner ditch' of the state, refers to the consensual aspects of political domination, and the 'intellectual and moral leadership of the dominant group' that attempts to persuade others to 'accept and internalise their views, values and norms' in order to reinforce the hegemonic order constructed by the ruling elites (Abrahamsen 1997, 147). Hence, the hegemonic elites do not only control society through coercive means but exercise 'ideological hegemony by manufacturing cultural and ideological consent' in society (Landau 2008, 245). Hegemonic ideology presents a glorified version of existing socio-economic and political arrangements based on, amongst others, hegemonic messages of national unity, development and growth. Such messages, discourses and narratives can be transmitted via a variety of channels and practices, for example through official state communication, propaganda through government-controlled media and education, through popular culture or through compliant civil society, such as political parties, trade unions, the church or public intellectuals. The focus of *WP5* is placed on examining the role of coercion and hegemony, and in particular on the identification of hegemonic elites' dominant legitimating narratives and practices, how these messages are transmitted and, crucially, in which terrains or sites they meet contestation, from whom and through which types of contesting discourses and practices.

Hegemony pervades collective living and affects the actions and ideas of particular persons (Gramsci 1971). The case studies in *WP5* will not explicitly focus on how hegemony affects and creates consensus on the legitimacy of the dominant ruling elites among the general population and processes and actions in and of 'everyday life'. However, an adjacent study of Algeria (as part of D2.4) will focus specifically on the 'everyday' as sites for compliance and contestation of hegemonic elite narratives.

Gramsci's (1973) concept of conjunctural terrain captures the idea of a dynamic system where certain factors combine spatiotemporally, that is, both in a given place and over a period of time to create certain effects, e.g. configurations of power, and geopolitical, material socio-economic, institutional, historical or ideological conditions. These underlying structural conditions are recognised to impact hegemonic elites, including their ability to resort to coercion and generate consent and legitimacy. While acknowledging the presence of material facts and conditions, a Gramscian perspective contends that such conditions do not exist independently of the discursive frames that give them meaning and significance. There can be 'multiple ways of naming and articulating what *is* our material condition' and this suggests that questions pertaining to economics, for example, are 'as much a question of ideology' and that it is 'vital that politicians present the current material conditions in a way to cull consent on economic reality' (Sim 2007, 156). In other words, for **WP5**, it is important not only to analyse socio-economic structural and institutional factors as such, but also to understand how hegemonic elites represent structural, material conditions in their legitimising narratives.

8.3 Research expectations and hypotheses

Gramsci distinguishes between governance by coercion (domination) and by consensus (hegemony). The two governance forms are not mutually exclusive; a state has an 'outer ditch' or 'armour of coercion' and an 'inner ditch' of consensus that legitimises state coercion and authoritarian elites and practices (Gramsci 1971, 124, 238, 363). The focus of this work package is not only on the 'outer ditch' but also on the 'inner ditch', namely on mechanisms of state/elite power, exercised through the communication of ideology, cultural, historical or other legitimising discourses and practices that blockage elites are using to legitimise and secure consensus that their coercive/ authoritarian rule is 'just' and 'legitimate'. Underlying geopolitical, material economic and ideological, historical conditions also play a role in Gramsci's approach, factors that he describes as 'conjunctural terrain'. According to Gramsci, these underlying structural factors do, however, not exist outside, or independent of, the discourses of the hegemonic elites. It is through naming and articulating what is 'our' material condition, for example, that blockage elites present the current material conditions in a way to create consent on their discourse on geopolitical, economic and ideological or historical conditions. In other words, the focus is not only on material conditions, such as socio-economic structures or institutional settings, but also on how hegemonic elites talk about material conditions, and how they frame the policy problems and responses to such conditions, which form an integral part of the discourses legitimating their rule. Figure 1 below summarises Gramsci's approach, illustrating the relationship between a state's outer and inner ditch within the larger field of the conjunctural terrain, and the role of hegemonic elites and contesting actors therein.

In *WP5*, success and failure of attempts at contesting the hegemonic blockage elites (RQ 2 and RQ 3) are expected to be shaped by the following factors:

(1) <u>Outer-ditch:</u> the effectiveness of the blockage elites' (use of) instruments of coercion and repression, to force the population into compliance.

(2) <u>Inner-ditch:</u> the effectiveness of the mechanisms of blockage elite's power, exercised through the communication of ideology, cultural, historical or other legitimising discourses and practices that blockage elites are using to frame reality and to secure consensus that their rule is 'just' and 'legitimate'.

(3) <u>Conjunctural terrain</u>: underlying geopolitical, material, socio-economic or institutional conditions, or a combination thereof, including how these are framed/ represented in blockage elites' legitimising narratives.

(4) <u>Contesting actors:</u> the effectiveness of contesting actors, including for example their own legitimacy, recognition or standing among the wider public, their material resources and/or contestation strategies.

RQ 4 relates to the role of the EU and how EUDP instruments can be used more effectively. The role of the EU, including the Council, the Commission, the External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Parliament, is examined in terms of policy instruments and practices as well

as official discourses related to EUDP. On the one hand, EU policy instruments (practices) may support the contesting actors, for example through the allocation of financial assistance or directly target blockage elites, for example by imposing restrictive measures against an incumbent regime or the freezing of bilateral aid or cooperation. As such, the EU's interventions can take place in the 'outer ditch' to lessen 'blockade elites' effectiveness in using coercion and repression, and they can directly support contesting actors by increasing their material and/or strategic resources. EU official discourses, on the other hand, can directly contest blockage elites' legitimating narratives, for example by internationally 'naming and shaming' a regime's authoritarian practices or human rights violations, while at the same time employing or reinforcing the narratives of contesting actors. With its official rhetoric, the EU may thus impact at the level of the inner-ditch, namely the communication of ideology, cultural, historical or other legitimising discourses of blockage elites.

At the same time, however, EU policy practices and discourses can have unintended consequences. For example, technical assistance meant to increase the effectiveness of border guards may end up paying equipment that is used for internal repression, support against corruption may be used to oust political opponents, and the EU's official rhetoric may 'unintentionally' resonate with/ reinforce the *status quo and* blockage elites' legitimating narratives (Bosse and Vieira 2023). The EU also forms part of the conjunctural terrain, which structures the underlying geopolitical, material, socio-economic or institutional conditions in which blockage elites operate.

WP5 examines to what extent and how the EU and EUDP impact on the 'outer' and 'inner' ditches of blockage elites' power and legitimacy, including the conjunctural terrain in which they operate. And it examines in how far the EU unintentionally reinforces contestation to, or the *status quo* of, hegemonic blockage elites, through EU policy practices/ instruments and/or official discourses. Against this background, *WP5* also reflects on how to improve EUDP at the level of practices and discourses. A focus is placed on contesting actors' interpretations and recommendations, which may propose EU policy actions ranging from forms of active EU interventions at the 'inner' and 'outer ditches' to a more limited 'do no harm' engagement with contesting actors or non-intervention.

8.4 WP5's overall theoretical argument

To sum up, the analysis in *WP5* draws on an innovative approach to understand authoritarianism and authoritarian practices and tendencies, based on *Gramsci's theory of hegemony* (Gramsci 1971, 1973). The approach focuses on issues of legitimacy, whereby ideology and other legitimisation discourses and practices play an essential role in attempts of authoritarian governments (or governments of hybrid regimes employing authoritarian practices) to secure legitimacy. The approach used here looks not only at coercion as an exclusive means of authoritarian governments and practice to persist or consolidate. The theory also recognises that the 'business of governance in any society includes defining

reality', and therefore that 'ideologically successful authoritarian governments can secure as much legitimacy as democratic governments' (Sim 2007, 145). This allows a focus on authoritarianism and authoritarian practices not only in non-free societies, but also hybrid regimes, thus *transcending the dichotomy between democracies and other types of regimes*, which is often found in mainstream modernisation theories.

At the same time, the approach employed in **WP5** also seeks to move beyond the economic determinism of Gramsci's writings (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). While a distinction is made between hegemonic elites and contesting elites, the former is not limited to bourgeoisie and capitalist ideology but depicts dominant blockage elites in a broader sense, as actors using or promoting authoritarian practices, and drawing on or utilising different sets of ideologies. In a similar vein, contesting elites are defined broader than Gramsci's working classes aiming for the redistribution of economic and political power. Instead, our definition refers to a wider range of actors who articulate values, ideas and norms that compete with the ruling elites' dominant discourse and ideology; yet with some qualifications with regards to what counts as contestation. The theoretical innovation introduced by the approach used in this work package is thus to find and define a middle-ground between the definitions of contestation as 'anti-capitalist' on the one end of the spectrum, and contestation as 'any form of opposition' on the other end (see **Figure 8** for an overview).

Figure 8. *Blockage and contesting elites in authoritarian and hybrid regimes*
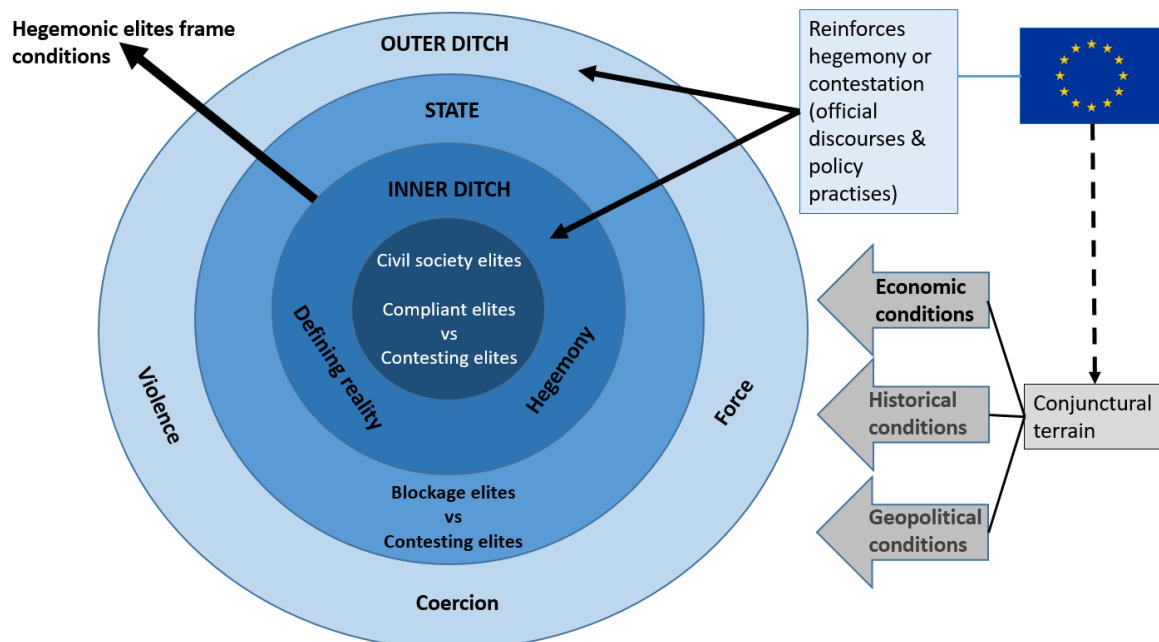
Source: WP5 authors' compilation.

9   Blockages to democratisation and peace (WP6)

9.1 Research questions and objectives

WP6 aims to investigate blockages to peace as well as the link between peace and democratisation processes. In order to approach the concept of peace, it draws on the UN's concept of 'sustaining peace', which "encompasses activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict".[2] As reaffirmed in the UN resolutions A/RES/70/262 and S/RES/2282, "sustaining peace should in practical terms not be distinguished from peacebuilding. It does not imply any redefinition of respective roles, responsibilities or mandates of UN entities. Both sustaining peace and peacebuilding are ultimately intended to reduce the risk of lapse or relapse into violent conflict. It can be seen as an aspirational goal, aiming at fostering the ability and capacity to look beyond crisis management and the immediate resolution of conflicts. The resolutions offer an opportunity to increase the focus of the UN system to preventing conflicts, so that not only the symptoms, but also the root causes of conflicts are addressed. Hence, the concept aims at tackling issues that may otherwise fuel new cycles of conflict".[3]

The key research questions guiding this literature review are:

(1) Which issues fuel new cycles of conflict in the country under study? In which ways have pathways to peace been blocked?

(2) How can these issues / blockages be tackled?

(3) In which ways (if any) are blockages to peace and democratisation linked?

In responding to these research questions, *WP6* aims to achieve the following research objectives: First, it seeks to collect and analyse empirical data on the construction of peaceful socio-political orders after conflict and revolution and explore the blockages to peace (i.e. to peacebuilding, mediation, statebuilding, social contract and civil society, development and grassroots peace agency). Second, it will explore in how far blockages to peace are related to a lack of democratisation in local, state, and regional contexts. And third, it assesses in which ways the EU's approach to democratisation can be adjusted to support the emergence of peaceful socio-political orders in conflict-affected societies more effectively.

WP6 has selected and will compare trajectories of peacebuilding *in Ukraine, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon and Palestine (West Bank and Gaza)* in order to answer the research questions.

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[2] See the United Nations' Guidance on "Sustaining Peace":
https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/guidance-on-sustaining-peace.170117.final_.pdf

[3] Ibidem.

9.2 Literature review and theoretical framework

9.2.1   Patterns of the counter-peace

The theoretical framework paper for **WP6** (Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka 2022) identified a range of blockages to peace in different types of conflicts. These sets of blockages differ depending on the nature of the conflict context:

(1) the *stalemate pattern* characterises frozen conflicts such as in the Balkans but also stalemated revolutionary contexts such as Tunisia,

(2) the *limited counter-peace* describes contexts in which parts of the country are un-affected by conflict, while other parts might suffer from a range of localised conflicts (e.g. the coexistence of local community conflicts with geographically confined insurgencies and regional secession conflicts in the Sahel region). Between 2014 and 2022, the territorially limited conflict in Ukraine's Donbas region fell into this pattern.

(3) the *unmitigated counter-peace* describes a conflict context, in which human rights violations are systemic across the country (e.g. Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, Israel's military occupation of Palestine and dictatorships).

At the heart of these three patterns lie different epicentres. The *stalemate* pattern revolves around a "formalised political unsettlement", through which a war has been ended, but which fails to resolve the radical disagreement between the conflict parties (C. Bell and Popisil 2017). Such settlements prevail in the shape of power-sharing peace agreements (as the Dayton Agreement in Bosnia and the Taif Agreement in Lebanon) or ethnic segregation complete with contested borders (as in Nagorno-Karabakh). The *limited counter-peace* centres on the "quasi-state", which enjoy sovereignty and often shares institutional features with Westphalian states, but lacks "the political will, institutional authority, and organized power to protect human rights or to provide socio-economic welfare" (R. Jackson 1990, 21). By contrast, the epicentre of the unmitigated counter-peace tends to be a "fierce state", "which is so opposed to society that it can only deal with it via coercion and raw force" (Ayubi 2009, 449). Examples of the fierce state are authoritarian regimes or military occupations. As the central pillars of political order in conflict-affected contexts or due to their alliances with powerful international backers, these epicentres are even more difficult to tackle than the sets of blockages that contribute to conflict perpetuation or escalation.

The counter-peace lens introduced in **WP6** helps to identify blockages to peace beyond the concept of "spoilers" (Stedman 1997; Newman and Richmond 2006). While the spoiler literature was confined to the analysis of individual tactics used by those who actively resist peace processes, our counter-peace concept expands this lens by studying 1) how these tactics connect spoilers across all scales (local, regional, national, international), 2) how tactics have been combined into strategies and 3) how tactics and strategies have been disseminated among networks of revisionist and revanchist regimes. It draws on concepts such as "authoritarian conflict management" (Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2018), "illiberal peacebuilding" (Soares de Oliveira 2011), and "devious objectives" (Richmond 1998).

Importantly, this analysis focuses on the entanglement of peace interventions with counter-peace processes in order to show why peace processes have become systematically blocked.

While there is some literature on the links between democratisation processes and conflict, none of these studies investigate the connections between blockages to democratisation and blockages to peace. Instead, the volatility and pace of democratisation processes has been diagnosed as a potentially conflict-fuelling factor (Snyder 2000; Paris 2004; Reilly 2008; Caplan 2012). Moreover, consociational democracies have been identified as potentially nurturing counter-peace dynamics (Wade 2016). Captured by conflict actors, constitutionally guaranteed power and control of institutions can perpetuate ethnic or sectarian tensions. While power-sharing agreements are supposed to allow the competition between the conflict parties to move from the battlefield into the parliament, consociationalism encourages mono-ethnic or sectarian political parties and reinforces identity-based voting patterns. The division of power along identity lines turns "ethnic entrepreneurs" or former "warlords" into gatekeepers of access to political influence (Rosiny 2015). With neoliberalism widening the gap between the beneficiaries of patronage and corruption and the impoverished rest of the population, the political economy of sectarianism or ethno-nationalism tends to foster political instability (Salloukh 2019). Hence, in consociational democracies, former conflict actors constrain both, democratisation and peace.

Yet, based on our reading of case study literature beyond the European neighbourhood, we expect that democratic backsliding can also fuel conflict, linking blockages to democratisation directly to blockages to peace. Exactly how these blockages are linked remains subject to the research carried out in this project since no literature seems to exist on this question.

9.2.2   The involvement of the international community

The international peace architecture (IPA) has developed a set of interventions (e.g. peacekeeping, meditation, peacebuilding, statebuilding, development), which are designed to restore peace and stability in post-war societies. Since the IPA has emerged in response to divergent types of conflicts and external pressures, it is characterised by uncertain compromises and has been compromised after 9/11 due to its entanglement with the War on Terror (Richmond 2022). Some of its elements contradict each other and provide opportunities for systematic blockages of peace processes: Top-down statebuilding and peacebuilding interventions in ethnically divided societies have resulted in elite peace capture, which exploits power-sharing arrangements to obstruct reconciliation (Wade 2016). Elites or identity groups have often managed to rescue their control of state institutions and resources despite the attempts of peace processes, social and revolutionary movements to redistribute (Brewer 2010). Hence, civil society struggles with these conflict-fuelling power structures, nationalism within and outside institutional settings, unresolved legacies of the conflict, and is unable to counter structural violence aggravated by neoliberal statebuilding. International statebuilding has failed to respond to local culture, needs, and questions of

global justice, while empowering warlords as well as criminalised power structures (Richmond 2014; Woodward 2017). This does not only undermine opportunities for reconciliation, but has resulted in narrowly based 'stabilisation' approaches (Keen and Attree 2015). Peace and reform processes have thus been stripped of peace dividends in the form of rights and material gains.

The credentials of international interventions are also mixed with regards to the success of establishing democracy (Walter 1997; Zürcher et al. 2013, 57-81). Only two out of 19 international peacebuilding operations launched since 1989 have resulted in liberal democratic regimes, while only seven led to the establishment of electoral democracies (Zürcher et al. 2013, 2).

The political prerogatives of peacebuilding missions have evolved and expanded massively in the 1990s (Doyle and Sambanis 2006). Still, the political components of peace missions vary considerably, ranging between no political prerogatives (only military security and support), limited mandates to secure the initial elections (Smidt 2016; Matanock 2017), or a mandate to secure the post- war political stability (Doyle and Sambanis 2000, 781-2), or in rare cases even the full suspension of democracy, and temporary international rule (e.g. East Timor, Kosovo) (Chopra 2000; Paris 2004, 213-218). The political pillar usually aims at an inclusive and democratic political order (O'Leary 2005, 33; Rothchild and Roeder 2005; Zürcher et al. 2013, 4; Belloni 2020).

Wantchekon (2004) points to the paradox that democracy may have better prospects after civil conflicts that end in a stalemate than before. In this theoretical argument, democracy is a means to resolve the power balance, and to address the security dilemma. This is though mirrored by warnings that the promotion of democracy after civil conflicts can lead to a novel tyranny of the majority (Recchia 2018), and in particularly rushed elections might lead to a relapse to ethnicised violence (Brancati 2014; Brancati and Snyder 2011; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Hug 2013). International election support and monitoring missions can mitigate these risks (Smidt 2016). Analysing global large-N samples, Hartzell and Hoddie (2020) and Juon and Bochsler (2022) show that the introduction of power-sharing institutions after civil conflict can contribute to the successful establishment of democracy. Sambanis (2020) shows that this effect is weakened if power-sharing is the result of external interventions on behalf of rebels. Moreover, under the conditions of a formalised political unsettlement (C. Bell and Popisil 2017) power-sharing might lead to sustained periods of democratic paralysis as the experiences of Lebanon, Bosnia and Northern Ireland have demonstrated.

The literature on ethnic conflicts has highlighted that democratisation should be delayed until domestic institutions are fully built. In particular, Snyder (2000) and Paris (2004, 156-211) point out that non- consolidated institutions are at highest risk to be conducive to ethnic mobilisation and the eruption of violence. Russell and Sambanis (2022) extend this argument to international intervention that ends prematurely. However, most of the literature is concerned with the fact that the temporary suspension of democracy in favour of institution-

building entails a shift of political responsibility from domestic actors to the international community (Fortna 2008; Zürcher et al. 2013, 57-81). External interference in domestic politics can accelerate processes of polarisation and non-cooperation among domestic elites (see the different articles in Petritsch and Solioz (2003); Marten (2004).

International actors mostly play a non-institutional role, or though the channels of diplomacy they exert political leverage, but there are exceptions to the rule: Bosnia and Herzegovina constitutes a peculiar case, because of the formalised, institutionalised prerogatives of the international community, including the right to dismiss elected representatives and subsidiary decree powers (Merdžanović 2017). The granting of such extensive powers to an outsider has been justified by the need to deal with the political stalemates of Bosnian democracy (Belloni 2009a), or the benefits the international intervention produces for the society itself (Ashdown 2002, 2007; Caplan 2004). In general, the Office of the High Representative to Bosnia and Herzegovina (OHR) interventions were believed to produce spill-over effects with regard to the functioning of the political institutions. The most positive assessments of the OHR state that it has provided necessary impulses for the vitalisation of political life and introduced reforms when they were most needed.

Whether interventions by international actors in the political process strengthens democracy, undermine the ownership of domestic elites and domestic institutions (Caplan 2004; Donais 2012), or reproduce and reinforce powerful domestic actors at the expense of democracy (Barnett, Fang, and Zürcher 2014; Russell and Sambanis 2022) remains a matter of vivid debate. Lee (2022) addresses diverging preferences between domestic and international elites. Belloni (2009b, 316), seconded by a formalised model by Bochsler, Merdžanović and Petrić (2020), analysing the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, show how external interventions to enhance democracy and stability have contributed to blockages in domestic politics.

Most of these assessments neglect the fact, however, that the role and performance of international interventions – studied at the case of the Office of the High Representative to Bosnia and Herzegovina (OHR)- should not only be judged against the counterfactual of his absence. Rather, the OHR's interventions have widely varied in their scope—from removing obstructive individuals from office and imposing procedurally blocked legislation, to different approaches regarding local ownership of the political process (Merdžanović 2015).

Bochsler, Merdžanović and Petrić (2020) distinguish two manners of intervention: A peacebuilding mission with an own political agenda relieves the domestic political actors of their political responsibility and deepens the domestic deadlock. If the peacebuilding mission acts as a (politically neutral) arbiter, using its powers to push for compromises between the domestic actors, it can foster cooperation, and strengthen the reform capacities of domestic politics.

Yet, these arguments focus solely on external democracy promotion and their outcomes. What *WP6* needs to analyse in its fieldwork phase is how blockages to democratisation are linked to blockages peace (e.g. structural and cultural violence, the subjugation of women,

[ethno-]nationalism, geopolitical support for peace spoilers, extractivism, counter-insurgency, spillovers of regional conflict, environmental degradation, alliances between autocrats). Moreover, *WP6* aims to investigate innovations, which could overcome those blockages.

9.3 Research expectations and hypotheses

From our theoretical framework paper (Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka 2022) follows the hypothesis **H1**: *Peace is systematically blocked by proto-systemic strategies that connect spoilers across all scales (local, regional, national, transnational) and exploit structural blockages to peace as well as unintended consequences of peace interventions.*

Analysis of innovations to overcome blockages to peace is currently hampered by the fluidity of the international order. Previous research critiqued the shortcomings of the liberal peace and suggested that its marginalisations and exclusions could be overcome through a hybridisation of the liberal peace (Richmond 2011b). Yet in the emerging multipolar order, the liberal peace may no longer constitute the basis for attempts to tackle blockages to peace. Indeed, a loose alliance of authoritarian countries is currently attempting to erode the international peace architecture and its underlying normative order in pursuit of creating an enabling environment for autocracy. In this new fragmented world order (Peters 2022), the space for tackling blockages to peace and democratisation might differ from region to region depending on the interests and ideologies of dominant geopolitical actors or alliances in the respective regions.

Due to the importance of the Eastern neighbourhood to both, Russia and the liberal Western alliance, the region will remain tightly contested by both camps. The Kremlin feels a "sense of entitlement" in its near-abroad and views this region as Russia's defensive perimeter, regarding attempts at democratisation and Western integration as a threat to Russia's security interests (Stent 2019). Western countries and the EU, by contrast, tend to foreground democratisation and integration into Western institutions as pre-fabricated solutions to Eastern European reform and peace deficits. Both camps will thus try to influence peace and reform processes in the Eastern neighbourhood in their favour. **H2**: *In Europe's Eastern neighbourhood, any innovations in tackling blockages to peace and democratisation are constrained by the geopolitical competition between Russia and the West.*

In the Southern neighbourhood, two consecutive waves of popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes (2011 in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen and 2019 in Lebanon, Algeria and Iraq) have generated only one case of sustained democratisation (Tunisia), which has recently also slid back into autocracy. Worse still, extensive interference of regional powers, excessive regime crackdowns and the arming of the rebellions have led to ongoing wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen (Lynch 2016; Cook 2017). Meanwhile, internationally coordinated peace interventions in the Southern neighbourhood have been blocked not only by Russian, Chinese (and in the case of Palestine: US) vetoes, but also by the waning appetite

of Western countries to intervene in the Arab region (Al-Haj Saleh 2017; Phillips 2020). Except for Lebanon, which is a stalemate case, the whole Southern neighbourhood now falls into the unmitigated counter-peace pattern. Contained by authoritarian regimes and cut off from international support, agency to promote peace and democratisation in the Southern neighbourhood operates in the margins under precarious conditions. **H3:** *Innovations to overcome blockages to peace and democratisation in the Southern neighbourhood are likely to be small-scale tactics with little impact on political order or conflict dynamics.*

Some of **WP6** partners' literature reviews suggest: **H4**: *Blockages to peace and democratisation are linked.* It will be the task of WP6 to identify and investigate these links.

9.4 WP6's overall theoretical argument

Our counter-peace concept provides a critical heuristic to identify how blockages to peace and reform processes are linked (Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka 2022). As a conceptual lens, the counter-peace widens the scope of analysis compared to its predecessor concepts: Beyond individual actions of spoilers, it investigates their domestic, regional and international connections, identifies how spoiling tactics are combined into strategies and how these strategies are disseminated among networks of revisionist and revanchist actors. By drawing on the counter-revolutions literature, this concept captures blocking processes that are embedded within peace and reform processes as well as those that overtly contest it.

Hence, the counter-peace lens also examines the entanglement of international peace interventions with counter-peace processes. The EU's stabilisation approach towards its neighbourhood is likely to harbour similar counter-peace dynamics to the IPA's stabilisation approaches. Counter-peace processes may mimic a watered-down version of peace and reform processes, in which the hierarchies, inequalities, and forms of marginalisation that fuelled the conflict are preserved, but where stability is restored through pacification. They may also constitute parasitic processes, in which spoilers subvert peace- and reform-oriented interventions in order to erode their emancipatory potential. Since the three counter-peace patterns identify a range of possible connections between blocked democratisation processes and stagnating or faltering peace processes, the counter-peace lens enables a comprehensive investigation in the WP's set of case studies.

Case studies in **WP6** will investigate in which ways peace and democratisation processes have become blocked, how these blockages are linked and what innovations to overcome them could look like. Hence, **WP6** identifies the most promising peace processes or peace interventions and elaborates how these have become blocked. In terms of the examined democratisation processes, the partners will focus on episodes of backsliding. The subsequent case studies summarise the literature on the questions above and identify, which aspects of the research questions will need to be empirically investigated in the subsequent fieldwork period.

10   The geopolitics of EUDP (WP 7)

10.1   Research questions and objectives

WP7 aims to understand the EUDP's potential when confronted with geopolitical challenges by powerful and authoritarian geopolitical rivals. It investigates how EU democracy promotion interacts or clashes with policies and tools used by these geopolitical actors, and it assesses the relative strength of EUDP vis-à-vis policies deployed by these rivals. *WP7* looks upon the motivations and tools used by the geopolitical rivals as well as towards the domestic situation (actors and processes) in the states that become a "battleground" for EU and its rivals' influences. *WP7* attempts to develop a comprehensive understanding of how all these forces interact, compete, clash or cooperate in order to identify new opportunities for EUDP.

Research in *WP7* entails evaluating the leverage and attraction of denser and weaker relations with the EU (from accession process and the membership perspective to EU preferential trade regimes and other political, economic and institutional ties) against ties – more or less institutionalised – with rival non-EU actors, such as Russia and China. The analysis aims to understand how issues such as a country's alignment to EU foreign policy or geopolitical competition over foreign policy choices of certain countries may or may not impact on the dynamics of EUDP. *WP7* also aims to analyse the power and appeal of EUDP when challenged by unfavourable preferences of domestic stakeholders and anti-EU attitudes of the wider society that are backed by geopolitical and geoeconomical rivals. Thereby, WP 7 complements EMBRACE's analysis of blockages to democratisation though a geopolitical lense.

WP7 focuses on the following research questions:

(1) What are the specific patterns of blockages to EUDP that emerge in the geopolitical and geoeconomical competition between major powers (at the national, regional or global level) who are rivals to EUDP?
(2) How can EUDP countervail anti-democratic (domestic and/or geopolitical) alliances?
(3) Given the blockages to democratisation, how can the EU better adjust EUDP to reflect partner and context sensitivity and increase its effectiveness?

Research for *WP7* breaks down in five key objectives. First, *WP7* seeks analyse the geopolitical competition that the EU encounters in its efforts to promote democracy. Second, *WP7* intends to understand the aims, strategies and tools deployed by non-EU actors in the European Neighbourhood and assess their interplay with locally deployed EU strategies and instruments. Third, *WP7* assesses the 'domestic demand' for illiberal politics and non-EU (geo)political influence and analyses how this demand forms blockages and opportunities to democratisation and EUDP. Fourth, *WP7* analyses the political economy of non-EU influences and how domestic/inside-out and external/outside-in interests converge to form blockages and opportunities to democratisation and EUDP. Finally, on this empirical basis, *WP7* draws policy-relevant conclusions about the projected trends of geopolitical competition to EUDP and offer ideas that will inform thinking about policy planning in response to these challenges.

10.2 Literature review and theoretical framework

10.2.1 The geopolitical competition between the EU and autocratic rivals

Despite its emphasis on trade, economic integration and functional cooperation as a win-win option transcending ideological and political differences, in recent years, the EU has faced a great deal of pushback from competitors (Babayan and Risse 2016). Such pushback has been most troubling in regions where the EU has deployed some of its most ambitious policies towards non-members. Those policies cover a variety of objectives which are at times compatible and at other times mutually contradictory. At the ambitious end, they include the spread of democratic rules, institutions and practices, the entrenchment of the rule of law and good governance. Medium range, EU priorities focus on economic modernisation through open-door trade and investment policies underpinned by robust regulatory institutions. At the "lighter" end, the EU and its member states prioritise stability, especially in light of threats such as irregular migration, smuggling and terrorism. EU competitors are mostly comfortable with the third set of objectives as they imply a policy of containment rather than intervention. However, democracy promotion and economic reform often run counter to their strategic interest or ideological predisposition.

Russia offers the starkest example of pushback against the EU as well as the West more broadly. After the so-called "colour revolutions" in the mid-2000s, it embarked on a strategy to reclaim its primacy in the post-Soviet space, triggering competition with the EU (Götz 2015; Delcoure 2018; Forsberg and Haukkala 2019; Toal 2019). Moscow's efforts culminated in the pressure on Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych to abandon an association agreement with the EU in November 2013 (A. Wilson 2015). The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked another cornerstone which led to dramatic disruption of political and commercial relations between the EU and Russia, the introduction of harsh economic sanctions targeting Moscow, and even the use of resources from the EU to offer military assistance to Kyiv. In the Southern Neighbourhood (Middle East and North Africa), Russia – similar to Iran or (in some cases) Saudi Arabia – aligned itself with incumbent authoritarian regimes as they rolled back the Arab Spring (Bechev, Popescu, and Secrieru 2021; Darwich et al. 2022). China, for its part, has been working to expand its economic and technological footprint across the EU's periphery, establishing partnerships with political elites in both democratic and authoritarian/semi-authoritarian states (Zhou and Esteban 2018; Vangeli and Pavlićević 2019; Fulton 2021).Turkey has pursued influence too, especially in lands formerly part of the Ottoman Empire, with President Erdogan's personalistic style of governance spilling over from domestic affairs to foreign policy and an increasingly frequent projection of its military capabilities overseas (Stein 2014; Kirisci 2017; Bechev 2022; Alaranta 2022).

WP7 develops an understanding of the geopolitical competition between the Union and its rivals based on two literature strands, namely the literature on autocratic competition as geopolitics and the literature on authoritarian diffusion. These two strands reveal different motivations behind autocratic countries' effort to project influence the neighbourhoods.

Autocratic competition as Geopolitics

The first literature strand stresses the geopolitical and strategic rationale behind national foreign policy. States like Russia, China, Iran and Turkey have a competitive and often adversarial relationship with the US and its Western allies, including the members of the EU. They feel threatened by the West, either because the West seeks to destabilise the regime's internal political foundations and/or prevents it to retain control over its sphere of influence (Rosencrance 2006; Kanet 2015; Mearsheimer 2022). In the case of China and Russia, what is also at stake is the systemic level of analysis, with the US – as the predominant power – being challenged by rising actors as the unipolar structure gives way to multipolarity (Schweller and Pu 2011; Alllison 2017; Cooley and Nexon 2020). According to this view, revisionists either seek to undermine the EU in order to weaken the Western, US-led alliance or they co-opt parts of the EU – whether it is influential member-states such as France or Germany, second-tier ones as Hungary or aspiring candidates outside the Union's boundaries – in order to upend established order or modify it to suit their needs (Cooley and Nexon 2020; Bechev, Popescu, and Secrieru 2021; Karásková et al. 2018; Orenstein 2019). In the neighbourhood, the opposition to EU and US-promoted democratisation is part and parcel of antihegemonic posture and policies adopted by the likes of China and Russia in the global arena. Autocratic rivals seek to outbid the West, undermine its policies and/or offer alternatives that may be more attractive than the policy straitjacket of conditionality-driven EUDP. The autocratic rivals may also expose the West's normative inconsistency, revealing severe deficiencies on the side of EUDP (such as lack of consistency in policy making, conflicting foreign policy objectives of different EU actors, or normative ambivalence).

Autocratic competition as Authoritarian Diffusion

The second literature strand stresses ideational rather than material factors, as well as transnational processes occurring at multiple levels as opposed to state-to-state level. Authoritarian actors (e.g. governments, political parties, civic organisations) tend to emulate and learn from each other across borders) (Lankina, Libman, and Obydenkova 2016; Bank 2017). The diffusion of norms and practices as well as institutional borrowing - a common theme in the voluminous literature on democratisation - is observable between non-democratic states, too. Whether it is borrowing anti-Western rhetoric (E. Finkel and Brudny 2012a), transfer of know-how on rigging elections (Cheeseman and Klaas 2018), deriving lessons from other regimes' downfall (Silitski 2010; Bunce and Koesel 2013), restricting NGOs (E. Finkel and Brudny 2012b; Gilbert 2020), spreading disinformation, the establishment of transnational networks of "counter-revolutionaries" (Burnell and Schlumberger 2010; Ambrosio 2010), the cross-border spread of authoritarianism takes multiple shapes or forms. It is particularly salient in contiguous regions where dense elite ties, overlapping public spheres and, oftentimes, a shared lingua franca (e.g. Russian, Arabic) facilitate transfers and cross-border interventions (Ambrosio 2010; Cameron and Orenstein 2012; Alllison 2017). Under authoritarian diffusion, *WP7* subsumes party-to-party cooperation and support.

Russia, China and Turkey, are exporting a political and governance model which is at odds with the liberal democratic paradigm embraced by the West, and the EU in particular (D.A. Bell 2015; McFaul 2020). They may do that for strategic reasons, namely to maximise their relative power. Yet autocratic actors could be promoting their values and worldviews driven by normative motives ("that's the right thing to do"). In such cases, revisionism is directed against the fundamental principles of international order rather than the balance of (military) power (Ward 2017; Krickovic 2021).

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that the two conceptual issues or themes (structure/process vs. agency; supply vs. demand) are equally present in the geopolitical framework of analysis. Russia's, China's or other players' pursuit of security or relative power (supply) could be juxtaposed with strategies espoused by regional and domestic-level actors reliant on support from outside (demand) (Way 2015a, 2016; Buzogány 2017). In the same vein, the challenge to EUDP could be alternatively seen as a function of systemic factors (e.g. relative balance of power) or of variables at the level of individual states, or indeed at the level of individual leaders or core leadership groups. The latter approach gives priority to agency over structural determinants and, in methodological terms, zooms in on foreign policy decision-making as an object of analysis.

In sum, the main distinction between the geopolitical and authoritarian diffusion framework of analysis boils down to whether research rests on the assumption that material factors and forces matter more than ideology or values, or vice versa. *Table 2* summarises the main features of each of the two ideal type motivations for authoritarian interference into domestic politics of EU neighbours.

Table 2. *Ideal type motivations for authoritarian interference*

	Geopolitical competition	Authoritarian diffusion
Structure	Distribution of material power	Distribution of regime types
Process	Use of coercive power Material support for allies and clients Interference in other countries' domestic affairs Exposing normative inconsistency of EU/West Outbidding EU/West and undermining conditionality	Emulation of authoritarian institutions and practices Erosion of democratic institutions and values through contagion
Perspective	Vertical, top-down, state-centric	Horizontal, bottom-up, transnational/societal-centric
Agents: supply side	Major non-Western/autocratic states	Illiberal elites in major autocratic states
Agends: demand side	Illiberal actors in EU neighbourhood seeking security or power	Illiberal actors in EU neighbourhood borrowing from major states' domestic arrangements
Relevant literature	Realism (IR) Classical Liberalism (IR)	Theories of Democratisation and Authoritarianism (Comparative Politics)

Source: WP7 authors' compilation.

10.2.2 Strategies and instruments deployed by non-EU actors and their interplay with EUDP

Having considered the main policy drivers as well as aims of the non-EU actors in the countries and regions lying on the Union's periphery, it is appropriate to pay attention to the strategies and instruments they deploy. The influence that foreign actors exercise over the countries of interest is not one-off, but builds on established diplomatic, economic and/or cultural ties, leverages the established relations between state and non-state actors, as well as interactions in multilateral organizations. It can be overt, in the form of economic engagement, soft power and sectoral cooperation, but also covert and based on influence/information operations.

Strategies

Studies have explored how Russia has utilized hard (aka military), economic and soft power to assert its role in regions as varied as the Eastern Neighbourhood, the Western Balkans and the Middle East and North Arica (Ohanyan 2018). It has resorted to military power directly as in the ongoing war in Ukraine or through proxies, instrumentalized economic interdependence (particularly in the area of energy) to exert influence or control over the domestic affairs and foreign policy of neighbours, sponsored illiberal and anti-democratic parties and social movements (Shekhovtsov 2017), engaged in disinformation and the spread of fake news with the aim to subvert adversaries and opponents, at times projected the image of the benign Big Brother using themes such as historical, cultural and ethnolinguistic ties to countries and societies, invested in regional institutions rivalling those supported by the West.

Turkey has borrowed from the same toolbox in asserting its role of a rising middle power whose influence spreads across the Western Balkans, the Black Sea and the Caucasus, the Middle East and North Africa and all the way to the Sub-Saharan region (Bechev 2022; Alaranta 2022; Alpan and Öztürk 2022). Since 2016, it has led several military interventions in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. Ankara has furthermore relied on trade, investment and foreign assistance to strengthen ties with countries and regions across its neighbourhood, oftentimes supported by the EU and the West more generally. Turkey has interfered in nearby countries' domestic politics, particularly at the height of the Arab Spring in the early 2010s when the prospects of moderate Islamist parties emulating "a Turkish model" loomed large. Last but not least, it uses soft power – from cultural exports to its own version of Islam as advanced by the Directorate of Religious Affairs – as a tool (Ozturk 2021).

China has likewise become visible in "wider Europe" and the Middle East and North Africa thanks primarily to its economic outreach. Low-interest loans and other forms of investment, the cornerstone of BRI, attract interest by governments and businesses. Beijing has supported the development of critical infrastructure – roads, railways and ports – improving its access to core European market as well as in the field of energy (Mações 2019; Chen Weiss 2019; Shambaugh 2020). Initiatives such as the China-CEE Cooperation Platform (commonly known as 16/14+1) also focus on information and communication technology (ICT), particularly in cutting-edge areas such as 5G and face recognition equipment and software. In contrast to

Russia which banks on "strongman rule", China's alternative governance model is in large a reflection of the country's economic success and technological prowess.

As for Chinese as well as Turkish foreign policy, there is clearer link between the domestic and the foreign policy realm. Proactive foreign policy serves constituencies at home (e.g. BRI catering to state-owned enterprises which profit from large-scale infrastructure projects overseas). With the overarching goal of preserving domestic stability as a precondition for the survival of the one party-state and the continuous rule of the CCP, China's foreign policy is anchored in domestic issues, needs and priorities. Hence, while the accumulation of relative power is arguably an outcome of China's global rise, and it is still a point of discussion whether in future it may become an objective in its own right, at present it should be seen as a consequence, rather than a driver behind China-led regional and global initiatives, especially those targeting countries beyond its immediate sphere of influence in Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

Other non-EU players such as the Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE and Qatar also exercise influence. It is most pronounced in the Middle East and North Africa where they have fought – directly and by proxy – in civil wars such as Syria, Libya and Yemen and support – politically, financially and through arm sales – countries, governments, parties and other actors (Phillips 2020; Pack 2021; Lackner 2019; Ghatas 2021). Yet those players are also active in other regions such as the Western Balkans or the Southern Caucasus where they have financial interests as well as connection to societies (e.g. networks based on faith) (Popescu and Secrieru 2018; Bieber and Tzifakis 2020).

Instruments

Looking at the vast literature on each of those non-EU players, one can see they use a broad spectrum of instruments ranging from military force to cultural connections. Roughly speaking, *WP7* identifies three types of instruments: (1) *coercion* or coercive tools, (2) *subversion/soft coercion* or subversive tools, and (3) *co-optation* or co-optative tools.

Coercion: Coercive tools are deployed by a geopolitical challenger/agent with the objective to radically alter the other party's behaviour in line with the political, economic, strategic or other preferences of the former (Freedman 2014; Bowen 2019; Zhang 2019; Tol 2022; McGlynn 2023). Direct military assault or the threat to use force, intervention into an internal armed conflict, terrorism, cyberattacks as well as forms of economic pressure such as embargoes and sanctions are all part of a given actor's arsenal. All of the above listed actors save China have a record of using such tools vis-à-vis other countries located on the EU periphery. Russia's war on Ukraine and Turkey's intervention in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict or in Syria would be paradigmatic examples. In some cases, such as the Libya conflict, on the EU's threshold, there has been intervention by numerous non-EU actors. Diplomatic tools may have a coercive side, too. Russia and China's permanent seat the UN Security Council has given them opportunity to dispense rewards and punishments (e.g. through the use or non-use of vetoes) and be involved in local conflicts such as Syria or Kosovo.

Subversion or soft coercion: Subversive tools are deployed with the aim to undermine the political stability, institutional capacity, smooth functioning of key state and democratic institutions of states from within (Sherr 2013; C. Walker 2018; Galeotti 2020). Such instruments may be deployed directly against adversaries, like the EU and key Western states, or aimed to undermine small states and governments that are aligned with the West and its foreign and security policy priorities. Examples of subversive tools are the meddling in domestic political processes, disrupting institutions, undermining political and electoral processes, waging disinformation campaigns, and actively supporting for anti-Western political and societal actors. "Hybrid" threats are exerted in the "grey area" under the threshold of war, that is organised violence at scale (Weissmann et al. 2021; Williamson and Mansoor 2012). Authors have identified Russia as the main purveyor of hybrid warfare, both against countries in the post-Soviet space as well as established Western democracies, including core EU member-states (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014; Shekhovtsov 2017). Some have shed light on the complex dynamic between state authorities and non-state actors/proxies which could be implementers but also play a decisive role on setting goals and selecting strategies towards their fulfilment, with or without supervision of the "principal" state agency (Arutunyan 2022). China in particular is seen as copying Russians' methods of subversion (or "active measures", to use the Cold War-era Soviet lingo) (Patey 2021; Weissmann et al. 2021).

One way to distinguish between hard and soft forms of coercion is related to the question of agency. In the first case, one state or a set of state actors are leveraging power resources – military might or economic tools – to apply pressure on another state/state actor. In the case of soft coercion, there is typically an intermediary (proxy), e.g. a state interferes in the domestic affairs of its adversary through allies or fellow travellers operating at the internal arena. By doing so, it benefits from layers of "plausible deniability" while subverting its target.

Co-optation: Co-optative tools are deployed by authoritarian states with the aim to create a strong foothold of leverage, influence or soft power in a small state that is otherwise aligned with the EU and the West or ambiguous over its geopolitical orientation. The ultimate goal of the geopolitical rival in the long run is typically to channel a given state's preferences in shaping foreign policy or domestic choices (Dawisha 2011; Bechev 2022; Isachenko 2019). However, depending on the political opportunities presented and the state of domestic or international play, that ultimate phase critical attempt to influence policy preferences may or may not occur. This third set of tools may include that the challenger develops ties with gate keeping elites in the target country, coming from political parties, business lobbies, the media or civil society groups. The most clear-cut example is Russian involvement in the energy sector across Middle and Eastern Europe. China's infrastructure or soft-loan diplomacy would also illustrate the patron-client relationship developed via concessionary finance. Co-optation also has an institutional dimension. Russia- and China-led international initiatives and platforms such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its

regional off-shoot, commonly referred to 14+1, formalise cross-border elite alliances along with reciprocal commitments and expectations (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2013; Nitoiu 2017; Cooley and Nexon 2020).

Sequencing and overlaps

In ideal type form, these three categories of instruments are supposed to define and delineate clearly distinguishable strategies on the part of geopolitical rivals. In theory also, the three types of instruments present clearly identifiable points in a continuum from the more (*coercion*) to the least (*co-optation*) assertive, robust and dynamic options. However, in reality – as in the case with the discussion over geopolitical rivals' motivations above – things are never so clear-cut. States' strategies do not necessarily move linearly from one option to the next. Political choices and instruments are not always in harmony. Overlaps between and across strategies and tools are not uncommon as a result of temporal or political changes in circumstances. **WP7** will attempt to unpack these nuances by developing a number of matching hypotheses. At the same time, however, the selected case studies may also uncover patterns that are not easily detectible in advance and not fully in line with the conceptual and empirical framework presented here.

Furthermore, the choice of instruments could be endogenous to EUDP, mirroring EUDP. Hence, co-optation could be a tool to undermine political and economic conditionality by shaping the preferences of target countries and their elites. Subversion could be deployed to counter both Western policies aimed at transformation (notably democracy promotion) but also less-ambitious and interest-driven objectives such as stabilisation of neighbours. However, challengers will pick and choose from their toolbox based on other factors too, notably their relative capabilities across different sets of instruments. A case in point is Ukraine where Russia presumably resorted to brute military force (extreme form of coercion) having exhausted co-optative and subversive instruments targeting the national political arena and the economic system of Ukraine.

Finally, the empirical analysis in **WP7** should also account for interaction patterns between the instruments that authoritarian rivals are using and the policies and instruments preferred by the EU and Western actors. The empirical work in the countries under investigation as well as the subsequent comparative analysis should be in position to draw conclusions about how such interaction patterns may unfold and what types of policies/instruments advanced by the EU prompt particular types of responses/instruments by authoritarian rivals and vice versa.

Implications for EUDP

All three sets of instruments – coercive, subversive and co-optative – hinder the Western democracy agenda and EUDP in particular. Coercive action, especially a full-blown war, skew the policy agenda from human rights and democratic accountability to security. Wars and frozen conflicts give rise to economies based on illicit trade and rent seeking. Equally, subversion is antithetical to democratic consolidation as it seeks to increase polarisation in

society and undermines institutions (e.g. parliaments, coalition cabinets, government agencies, courts, the public sphere, civil society) whose purpose is to seek consensus, safeguard public interest, provide neutral arbitration in politics or uphold the rule of law. The same is true for co-optation where external influence and state capture at the domestic level mutually reinforce one another.

At the same time, EUDP cannot be assumed to be the EU's dominant, let alone the only, modus operandi in its neighbourhood policy. The empirical record suggests that EU institutions and especially member-states pursue goals other than the export of democratic norms and institutions (Grimm and Leininger 2012). Strategic motives such as the preservation of stability, the control of migration, access to key resources such as natural gas or crude oil, support of ethnic communities, social groups and/or political actors aligned with the EU actor in question (e.g. Hungarians in Western Ukraine) typically take precedence when they turn to be at odds with normative goals. That is why, research should not assume that non-EU actors are by definition opposed to the EU because of the inherent tension between democracy and autocracy. Rather, case studies have to consider how various parts of the EU's policy affect and interact with the policy pursued by other international players.

10.2.3 The 'domestic demand' for illiberal politics and non-EU (geo)political influence

One central theme in the literature is that non-EU (geo)political influence is conditioned and mediated through domestic demand for illiberal politics. It draws on a rich tradition in IR inspired by the so-called "second-image reversed" (Gourevitch 1978) and two-level games (Putnam 1988; Moravcsik 1997) bodies of work. Authors have argued that political leaders balance between EU and its rivals and competitors to cement their power internally. Foreign influence generates additional rents that sustains clientelist networks essential to the survival of autocratic and semi-democratic regimes. It also shields incumbents from Western criticism related to the encroachment on the rule of law, human rights or even basic procedural norms related to the electoral process (von Soest 2015; Tolstrup 2015). It is also possible that domestic demand could also be a function of political competition: factions and actors on the internal arena soliciting external support in order to obtain an upper hand relative to their rivals (Bubeck and Marinov 2019). Societal norms and attitudes favouring strong-man rule and/or other forms of illiberal governance could be part of the equation as they result in ideological predisposition favouring external involvement or create incentive to elites to "play to the gallery". Last but not least, domestic demand could reflect rent-seeking structures in the economy which facilitate cross-border entanglements based on the (re)distribution of the spoils of state capture (more in the following section) (Cooley 2012).

Tolstrup (2013) introduces the concept of gatekeeper elites. These are domestic elites who – in the logic of Levitsky's and Way's (2006) linkage and leverage model – can choose to increase or decrease the density of linkages to external actors. As such, the key to democratisation or autocratisation, and therefore to closure or opening, lie with the domestic elites. These

domestic elites can be political, economic or civil society elites. On the surface, the political elites seem the most important, and they are the focus of much of the research already done into the preferences and motivations of elites to democratise or retain the status-quo. A closer look is needed, however, at the economic elites, in line with the economic policy tools of the EU and EMBRACE, and the civil society elites, which are the main actors in bringing about a domestic drive for democratisation (see here also **WP5**). Our analysis will focus on domestic elites as one of the three key types of agents in the international-cum-domestic geopolitical competition that influences democratisation. The empirical analysis will examine in detail the role of particular elites in each context and also understand whether certain groups indeed function as 'gatekeeper elites' that switch on or off the pressure valve for democracy or authoritarian influences. The comparative analysis framework will then also attempt to draw broader conclusions on the basis of the examined countries and cases.

Domestic demand can therefore be disaggregated along two axes: (1) direction of causality and (2) normative vs. instrumental. Regarding the first dimension, demand could be generated by means of top-down elite manipulation of public attitudes or legitimation strategies which justify cooperation with non-EU powers. Alternatively, it could result from bottom-up attitudes (e.g. anti-Western sentiments in society) which then bear on elite strategies on the domestic arena.

As far as the second dimension is concerned, demand could be a function of cost-benefit calculations of domestic actors (instrumental model) or of ideological resonance (normative model). This ideal-typical distinction speaks to the juxtaposition of geopolitics and authoritarian diffusion discussed above (for an overview see **Table 3**).

Table 3. *Conceptualizing domestic demand*

	Instrumental	**Normative**
Top-down	Elites mobilise society to justify alignment with foreign actors	Elites' values align with foreign actors' ideological agenda
Bottom-up	Social groups align with foreign actors in expectation of material gains	Foreign actors' ideological agenda resonates with society which constrains elites' choices

Source: WP7 authors' compilation.

10.2.4 The political economy of non-EU influences

The literature identifies the economic domain as particularly susceptible to foreign/non-EU influence. External actors tend to instrumentalise trade and financial interdependence as leverage over target countries' domestic politics and foreign policy. Increased cross-border flows are part and parcel of globalization, encouraged by EU policies favouring openness.

However, in combination with weak institutional capacity, compromised rule of law and state capture they produce vulnerabilities ready to be exploited.

To analyse the political economy of non-EU influences one has to pay attention on the dialectic between domestic-level demand and external supply. As in other social arenas, foreign actors influence in the economic field typically works through partnerships with local stakeholders. They include governments, regulators, state-owned companies and the private sector. Both foreign actors and their domestic partners could be motivated by commercial profit, whether in the form of creating value or extracting rent. But there is inevitably a latent political element in that business relations are embedded in diplomatic/political/security partnerships at the state-to-state or elite-to-elite level. Furthermore, state actors could use their sway over business agents, dependent on patronage in their home turf, to pursue political goals.

Patterns of economic linkages and dependencies are of high relevance to democratisation and autocratisation alike. The partnerships between foreign state and domestic economic actors could act as veto players preventing reforms, whether at sectoral or the national level, geared towards accountability and deepening of the rule of law. That is of high relevance to economies with traditionally high extent of state ownership of assets, where political class looks at the public sector as a resource base. This is the case of post-socialist economies in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans but also in other parts of the EU neighbourhood.

The academic and policy literature has paid much attention between the nexus of rent seeking, non-Western actors' influence and democracy/authoritarianism. This includes Russia's energy ties through state-owned firms such as Gazprom, Rosneft and private players such as Lukoil maintaining dominant market position, fending off competition thanks to political protection, and feeding state-capture at national level (Conley et al. 2016); Chinese "chequebook diplomacy" investments into infrastructure providing concessionary loans under China's BRI infrastructure program, used as a carrot for better political relations but also as means to establish patron-client relations with local players (Mações 2019; Patey 2021); Gulf states' Investment in real estate as into the Belgrade Waterfront (Bieber and Tzifakis 2020); and in the banking sector, Russia's efforts to transfer financial assets to other post-Soviet states in order to bypass Western scrutiny/sanctions.

Not all types of economic engagement carry the same weight in influencing the political agenda and choices of political elites. Some economic dependencies are crucial parameters in domestic actors' calculations; they may form the backdrop against which many EU and democracy-related decisions are taken. Whether an economic influence by an authoritarian power may be deemed crucial and catalytic for political preferences may be determined on a case-by-case examination.

10.3 Research expectations and hypotheses

The hypotheses of *WP7* aim to unpack the actions and reactions of three types of actors: the autocratic rivals (H1, H2, H3, H5), the EU (H4), and the domestic elites (H6, H7 and H8). The emphasis in *WP7* will be in the actions and policies of authoritarian rivals and domestic elites, hence, *WP7* takes an actors-centred perspective. All hypotheses have been built on the basis of three main assumptions. The first assumption is: The greater the influence and political, economic, military footprint of a geopolitical rival in a state in EU's neighbourhood the more difficult it is for the EU to introduce, implement and follow through policies, instruments and measures aiming at promoting democracy. By the same token, we assume that the potential for blockages of all sorts will tend to be greater the more a country has developed dense political, economic, and military relations with authoritarian geopolitical rivals.

The second assumption is: All things being equal, states will opt for political and economic tools, and generally the less confrontational instruments (*subversion* or *co-optation*) rather than the direct use of military force and more aggressive instruments (*coercion*). Because military force is costlier, its outcome more uncertain, and its political-diplomatic cost and downsides greater than any of the less violent-prone and confrontational instruments, even authoritarian states will likely choose not to use coercive means. This is the case unless it is absolutely necessary, and no other alternatives seem plausible; or if the opportunity cost is calculated to be exceptionally minimal.

The third assumption is: Geographical distance shifts the balance away from coercion to co-optation. States are more likely to resort to coercive means in their immediate neighbourhood in order to prevent or reverse adverse developments, including unfavourable democratic change. This is because the application of military force is facilitated by spatial contiguity and/or denser economic linkages tied to geographic proximity provide opportunities for sanctions, embargoes, border closures etc. The case in point is Russia in the post-Soviet region. Remoteness increases the likelihood that authoritarian rivals will use non-coercive instruments. This is also what the example of China's policies in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans demonstrates.

These considerations lead *WP7* to the following hypotheses:

H1. The deeper the domestic political and institutional crisis and division in a given state the more likely it is that an authoritarian power will use subversive instruments.

H2. The more EU activity and influence (including its democracy promotion aims) in a given state is perceived by an authoritarian power as a major threat to its vital national interests, the more likely it is to resort to coercive instruments in dealing with that state.

H3. The more well-established and denser relations of a given state are with the EU, the less likely it is that an authoritarian power will use coercive measures in dealing with that state.

_H4_. The EU will be ready to "dilute" its democracy promotion principles and give priority to security and material interests in its policies and measures in a given state, the more it encounters domestic anti-EU sentiment or pushback by authoritarian rivals in that state.

_H5_. An authoritarian state will seek bottom-up allies and/or to exploit grassroots demand for non-EU influence, when political elites in a given state maintain or seek to develop denser relations with the EU, including in the field of democracy promotion.

_H6_. Political elites in a given state will tend to seek alternative geopolitical options the more their cost-benefit calculations about their state's relations with the EU seem less favourable to their political and material interests.

_H7_. The higher the popular demand for non-EU influence in a given state is, the lower is the threshold beyond which political elites will deem EU influence as damaging to their interests.

_H8_. The higher a state's economic dependence on an authoritarian power, the more that power will feature in the cost-benefit calculations of political elites and the less inclined the political elites will be to accept EU influence in matters of democracy, and other key policy making spheres.

10.4   WP7's overall theoretical argument

_WP7_'s theoretical argument can unfold in three tiers as follows (see also **_Figure 9)_**:

Tier I: The backdrop to the geopolitical competition between EU and autocratic rivals is the particular combination of geopolitical thinking, authoritarian/ideological motivations and/or unintended consequences that is encountered in different country settings. The particular mix of these factors will provide the backdrop to the analysis of the interaction of agencies and factors that promote or hinder democracy.

Tier II: Three key clusters of factors play the determining role in the competition over democratisation. _First_, the types of relations a state in question maintains with the EU, and in particular the density of political, institutional, economic and military ties. _Second_, the particular configuration of domestic demand for non-EU influence; this may be top-down or bottom-up demand, and it could have its basis of economic/material, political or cultural/historical factors. _Third_, the type of instruments that authoritarian rivals are deploying in a particular setting; these can be coercive, subversive or co-optative. An alternative way of viewing this tier of analysis is that focuses on three distinct but interacting milieux of agency and influences: the EU and its policies, the domestic context with its elite and societal preferences, and the policies deployed by the autocratic rivals.

Tier III: The interplay of the factors in the three pillars of Tier II determine the outcomes in terms of antagonism over democracy in a particular setting. The outcomes of Tier III are the configuration of blockages preventing and opportunities enabling breakthroughs in democratisation.

Figure 9. *Configurations of blockages in the geopolitical competition*
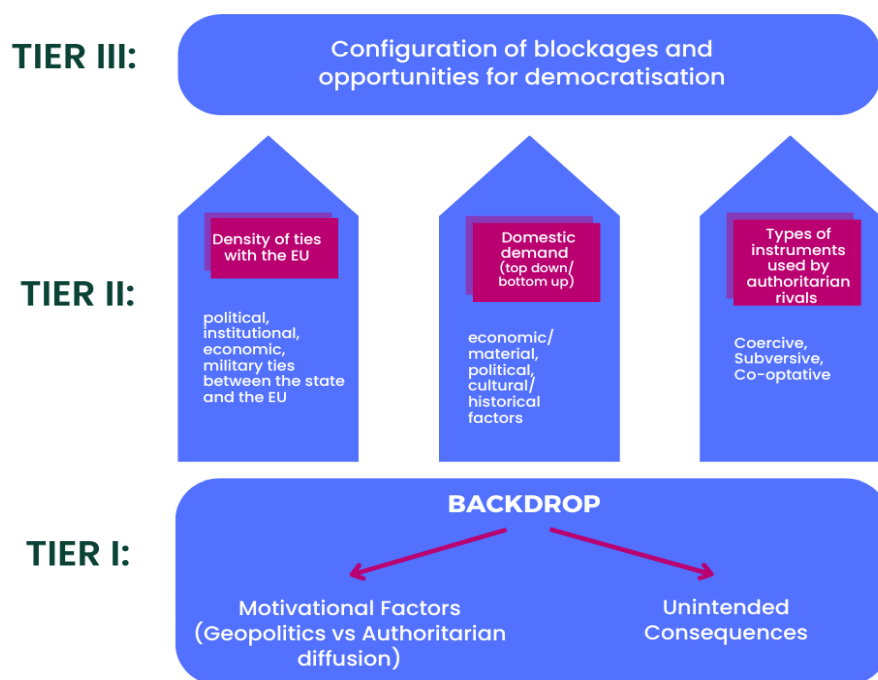
Source: WP7 authors' compilation.

11   Cross-cutting issues Gender and Culture in Action (WP2)

11.1 Gender

Gender refers to the socio-cultural norms, behaviours, expectations, and ideas linked to persons of a particular sex. Women and gender minority groups all over the world are still being denied (parts of) their fundamental political and civil rights or are severely punished for transgressing fundamentally discriminatory social norms (Güllü 2019). This also applies within the European context and especially in eastern European states, where the de-democratisation process is challenging equality of gender and sexual orientation (Ghodsee et al. 2021; Lombardo, Kantola, and Rubio-Marin 2021), or fueling anti-gender mobilisation (Rawłuszko 2021). Within the democratic backsliding there is also a cultural backlash, which in particular is highly difficult for gender equality and those actors standing for it (Ghodsee et al. 2021). De-democratisation is particular demanding for women, because democratic principles stand for equality, openness, universality, rights, inclusion, participation, and contestation (Lombardo, Kantola, and Rubio-Marin 2021). While democratic institutions predate gender equality, the contemporary focus on gender equality is integral to the process of democratisation and should not be solely attributed to it (Welzel, Norris, and Inglehart 2002). With the removal of these democratic attributes, women and members of the LGBTIQIA community are the most affected. In the southern neighbourhood, the non-democratic nature of most states inhibits gender equity, however, women's rights movements have also been at the forefront of popular struggles for modernity, democratization, and meaningful citizenship (Moghadam 2013).

The cross-cutting issue of gender will be investigated in all thematic Work Packages, as gender is a relevant topic for democratisation, affecting the whole of society when it comes to increases or decreases in political participation and representation of all parts of society within politics. Different instruments of gender equality need be considered and their potential for becoming or overcoming blockages need to be investigated. The role of the EU as a normative gender rights champion in the European neighbourhood also needs to be examined, both in its liberalising effects and its unintended consequences (David and Guerrina 2013).

EMBRACE also adopts an intersectional approach to gender, which was originally defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) as "a way of framing the various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color". Taking an intersectional approach means examining how socio-political power structures and dynamics favour or disadvantage persons of the same gender differently, based on other social identity markers such as age, socio-economic class, ethnoreligious background, disability, sexual orientation, marital status, and so on. Although democracy has a generally positive impact on women's rights, women of minority backgrounds and those who are poor, for example, might experience greater marginalization in their everyday interactions with the state. Yet, the existence of democratic institutions allows for other groups to actively mobilize on behalf of such disenfranchised women (Jamal 2010).

In addition, EMBRACE's research will be informed by a feminist institutionalist lens, focussing on formal and informal institutions within democratisation processes and how these institutions are both gendered and gendering (i.e. both reflecting as well as reproducing unequal gender relations). Feminist institutionalist theory is also concerned with change and continuity within this complex interplay of gendered/gendering (in)formal institutions, and pays attention to the voice and participation of women as agents of change (Debusscher and Anna van der Vleuten 2017).

11.1.1 Gender and its potential to create blockages to democratisation

Unequal inclusion in politics typically effect women, youth and minorities. Such deficits in representation and inclusion can turn into a blockage to democratisation. In turn, gender equality is a necessary condition for political opening (*WP3).*

Gender-related dynamics influence patterns of contentious politics and mobilisation. Hence, to achieve democratic gains after political uprisings (or the lack of it) can in part be explained by potentially diverging views with regards to gender equality and its promotion and the relationship to democratisation *(WP4)*.

In authoritarian and hybrid regimes, equal participation of all genders might be less likely than in democracies. In such a context, gender may be used as a frame to mobilise supporters and contenders of blockage elites; it might also be used by blockage elites to repress a gender-sensitive political opposition *(WP5)*.

Men and women are affected differently by conflicts due to their gender, but also due to age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class etc. Gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and age mutually reinforce or compound the effects of conflict or reduce subject's potential to participate in conflict resolution and democratisation. To which extent and in what ways this takes place, needs still to be studied *(WP6)*.

It also remains to be studied whether and to what extents men and women in the composition of political elites and officials are involved in the interaction with illiberal actors, whether there is a difference in the approach and outcomes, whether there is a preference for interaction with men or women, and what might explain potential differences (*WP7)*.

11.1.2 Summary expectations on gender

To sum up, gender is a relevant topic for democratisation, as for example the equal representation of men and women in critical junctures of democratisation is concerned. The non-representation of women and the mistreatment of their rights in processes of political change are signs for de-democratisation or autocratisation; out of non-represented groups new demands for political reform are likely to be generated. Therefore, all WPs in EMBRACE

include the issue of gender into the research framework and take gender issues into consideration when conducting interviews and selecting research participants for the study of blockages to democratisation and the identification of ways to overcome these blockages.

11.2 Culture in Action

The cross-cutting issue of Culture in Action allows an ethnographic approach to research, aiming to achieve a profound understanding of culture's impact on political attitudes, practices, and the construction of political meaning. This analytical framework includes an exploration within EMBRACE of how grassroots social and political forces navigate towards incremental democratic advancements while encountering obstacles, all through the lens of Culture in Action. This exploration involves a detailed examination of how individuals adapt and reconfigure their "cultural toolkit" (Swidler 1986, 2001) in response to shifts in political dynamics, whether toward blockages or opening. Additionally, it involves analysing how citizens as political actors develop and deploy new strategies of action tailored to specific political contexts, contributing either to democratic progress or hindrance.

Homi K. Bhabha's seminal work 'The Location of Culture' (1994) provides valuable insights into cultural studies and postcolonial theory, offering perspectives that intersect with Ann Swidler's framework of Culture in Action. While his primary focus is on postcolonialism, Bhabha's examination of cultural location and representation dynamics resonates with Swidler's exploration of culture as a dynamic force shaping individual behaviour and societal structures. He introduced the concept of the 'third space,' an ambiguous and hybridised realm where cultures intersect and identities are negotiated. This concept aligns with Swidler's view of culture as continuously evolving and shaped by interactions within social environments. Both scholars emphasize the fluidity and complexity of cultural processes, highlighting how individuals navigate and negotiate their cultural identities amidst dynamic social contexts. By situating culture within broader power relations and social dynamics, Bhabha's work complements Swidler's analysis of culture's multifaceted impact on political attitudes and behaviours.

In contrast, the Culture in Action paradigm, as articulated by Swidler, offers a comprehensive understanding of culture's influence on social dynamics, particularly within democratization processes. Swidler's framework serves as a basis for examining how various cultural elements intersect with broader political institutions and their development. Additionally, the exploration of narratives' role in shaping identities, as discussed by Somers and Gibson (1994), underscores the significance of understanding narrative construction within social groups to comprehend identity dynamics and embedded power relations.

Central to Swidler's perspective is the recognition that culture is dynamic, continually shaped by individuals and groups in response to political contexts. This understanding highlights the intertwined nature of culture and the political environment, with culture influencing and being

influenced by political relations. The Culture in Action perspective posits that changes in the broader social and political structure catalyse shifts in cultural norms and practices, with individuals and groups adapting their actions accordingly.

Moreover, beyond Swidler's work, the insights from Michel Foucault (1977) and Pierre Bourdieu (1972) offer valuable perspectives on the relationship between culture, power, and social change. Foucault's concepts of discourse and power relations, along with Bourdieu's notions of habitus and symbolic capital, enrich the analysis of cultural dynamics within democratising societies. These theoretical lenses provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms driving political change and further illuminate the complex interplay between culture and politics in contexts of social transformation.

11.2.1 The cultural toolkit and strategies of action

At the heart of the discussion on culture and agency lies Ann Swidler's concept of the "cultural toolkit," as central to understanding how individuals navigate their social environments. Swidler's framework (1986, 2001) posits that individuals utilise a diverse array of symbolic and material resources, including symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews, to interpret and engage with their social worlds. This conceptualisation underscores the active role individuals play in constructing meaning within their cultural contexts, actively selecting and interpreting cultural resources based on personal experiences, social networks, and broader political contexts. Moreover, Swidler highlights the dynamic nature of the cultural toolkit, which evolves over time in response to both individual agency and changes in the broader social and political landscape.

Margaret S. Archer's exploration of culture and agency further enriches this understanding, offering valuable insights that intersect with Swidler's analysis of Culture in Action. Archer (1996) delves into the role of culture within social theory, emphasising how culture influences human agency and shapes social practices. Her emphasis on the significance of culture in shaping human agency aligns with Swidler's perspective on the active role of individuals in interpreting and engaging with cultural resources. Both scholars recognize the complex relationship between culture and social structure, emphasizing that culture is both influenced by and influences broader social and political contexts.

Additionally, Swidler's Culture in Action paradigm offers a powerful analytical framework for understanding the complexity of political processes amidst turmoil or repression. Through nuanced descriptions of political action, it reveals how political actors utilise the cultural toolkit to interact within the broader political structure. This framework sheds light on the outcomes of processes of change and offers insights into the dynamics of democratisation, emphasising the importance of understanding culture as a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that shapes and is shaped by political processes.

11.2.2. Cultural repertoires within processes of political change

The concept of cultural repertoire, as expounded by Swidler (2001), elucidates the array of cultivated capacities and symbolic materials that political actors employ to organise their actions over time. This repertoire, akin to a toolkit, encompasses symbols, narratives, rituals, and worldviews, among other elements, imbued with rich meaning and significance. Strategies-of-action, persistent organisational forms of action, find their causal underpinning in culture, providing actors with the competencies and symbolic resources necessary to orchestrate their actions effectively.

Culture in Action offers insights into how culture shapes social action and organisation, highlighting the selective appropriation and utilisation of cultural meanings by individuals. In moments of upheaval, individuals become acutely aware of their cultural tools and strategies, rendering cultural systems susceptible to radical change. These periods of flux, what in EMBRACE terms has been named episodes, has prompt individuals to adopt new experiences and alternative frameworks of meaning, leading to the potential revision of cultural repertoires, incorporating both novel and familiar cultural elements.

Moreover, Swidler's framework delineates the continuum of cultural meanings, comprising ideology, tradition, and common sense, which collectively inform individuals' understanding of their social world. Ideology represents explicit beliefs and values articulated systematically, often associated with formal institutions and movements. In contrast, common sense embodies implicit and unarticulated assumptions guiding everyday behaviour, while tradition encompasses culturally transmitted practices and beliefs spanning generations. These facets of culture are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, shaping individuals' perceptions and actions in varied contexts.

Amidst periods of significant social transformation, cultural practices and their impacts on political change come into sharp relief. Individuals navigate diverse cultural resources, adapting and utilising them to suit changing circumstances. Ideologies, symbols, and rituals emerge as influential tools, shaping individuals' actions and strategies in response to shifting political landscapes.

The concept of cultural repertoire underscores the existence of learned capacities that individuals employ in navigating complex social environments (Swidler 2001). This repertoire offers multiple frames of reference for individuals and organisations to interpret and engage with diverse contexts of action. Actors exhibit creativity in selecting and combining elements of their repertoire to construct strategies of action tailored to specific challenges. However, this creativity operates within the bounds set by existing repertoires, highlighting the constraints and possibilities inherent in cultural adaptation and innovation.

In essence, the notion of cultural repertoire provides a lens through which to understand how culture is mobilised in response to concrete political experiences. It illuminates the dynamic interplay between culture and political action, offering insights into the creative adaptation and utilisation of cultural resources within changing social and political contexts.

11.2.3. Culture in Action in democratisation

The cultural framework articulated by Ann Swidler (1986, 2001) presents a sophisticated analytical approach for scrutinising the intricate dynamics inherent in processes of democratisation. Democratisation, at its essence, entails intricate interactions among political frameworks, cultural norms, and societal values. Swidler's model delineates a continuum of cultural meanings, encompassing ideology, tradition, and common sense, thereby highlighting the multifaceted nature of individuals' comprehension of their social milieu. This continuum serves as a fundamental basis for examining how cultural repertoires influence individuals' interpretations and behaviours across various contexts of action.

Central to Swidler's conceptualisation is the notion of the cultural toolkit, comprising symbols, narratives, rituals, and worldviews that individuals employ to navigate their social milieus. Within the context of democratization, cultural practices wield substantial influence over the progression or hindrance of democratic reforms. While certain cultural practices may impede democratisation endeavours, adjustments to the cultural toolkit and references to past cultural behaviour can exert pressure on political elites, prompting significant change.

Moreover, the perspective of McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) underscores the importance of comprehending culture's role in shaping social and political processes. Through a nuanced understanding of culture and its implications for social change, Culture in Action emerges as a potent analytical tool for unravelling the complexities inherent in processes of democratisation. This focus aligns with Culture in Action's examination of how cultural practices and repertoires mould social and political dynamics.

In particular, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) introduce the concept of repertoires of contention, referring to the array of tactics and strategies available to social movements. This concept resonates with Culture in Action's exploration of cultural repertoires and their role in informing strategies of action within specific political contexts. Additionally, their emphasis on the interaction between culture and collective action parallels Culture in Action's recognition of culture as a dynamic force that shapes political attitudes and behaviours.

Furthermore, Culture in Action accentuates a bottom-up perspective, highlighting the significance of grassroots social and political forces in propelling democratization efforts through their cultural practices and strategies of action (Swidler 1986, 2001). By acknowledging the intricate interplay between culture and political structures, Swidler's framework offers a nuanced analytical lens for comprehending the multifaceted nature of democratization processes.

Additionally, Swidler's emphasis on the symbolic meaning embedded in cultural practices elucidates how these meanings influence political attitudes and behaviours. Cultural repertoires, as conceptualized within Swidler's framework, provide individuals and organizations with diverse frames of reference to navigate various contexts of action. This

facilitates a comparative analysis across different democratization contexts, offering insights into the diverse ways in which culture shapes political change.

In essence, Culture in Action provides an empirically rigorous approach to investigating democratisation processes, grounded in real-world contexts and experiences. By examining the intersection of cultural dynamics with political structures, Swidler's framework offers a comprehensive perspective on democratisation, considering the intersectionality of cultural practices with other social factors such as gender, ethnicity, and class (Swidler 2001). Through a nuanced understanding of culture and its implications for social change, Culture in Action emerges as a potent analytical tool for comprehending the complexities inherent in processes of democratisation.

To reveal these patterns, the cross-cutting issue Culture in Action is well connected to *WP4, WP5, and WP6*. Its research aims to explore how culture, understood as political attitudes, beliefs, understandings and symbols, is manifested and performed in specific political episodes, focusing on the dynamic interactions, symbols, practices, and meanings that shape actors' behaviour and actions within a specific political context and around specific political conflicts.

12   Summary: Research questions and hypotheses

To conclude, this final section summarises the main hypotheses that guide the empirical analysis of EMBRACE in reference to the first and the second bundle of research questions as stipulated in the EMBRACE Grant Agreement. The third bundle of research questions on the necessary adjustments of EUDP will be tackled in greater detailed once the empirical results of comparative research in *WP3, WP4, WP5, WP6, and WP7* have been completed (to be expected in year 3 of the EMBRACE project). It is planned that some of the hypotheses that promise explanatory power in the middle-n studies of *WP4, WP5, WP6, and WP7* will be further tested in a large-n sample in *WP3*.

12.1   RQ1 on blockages to democratisation

In the beginning, the *Theory Framework Paper* has introduced the reader into the current state of democracy at world stage, its crisis and the rise of autocracy in order to define and describe the phenomena of de-democratisation and autocratisation. It clarified the concept of democracy, democracy promotion and the blockages to democratisation that informs empirical research in EMBRACE. EMBRACE accounts for behavioural, institutional and structural blockages that negatively influence democratisation or keep political actors away from democratic openings. On this basis, an analytical model for the study of behavioural, institutional and structural blockages has been suggested. As first main research question, EMBRACE asks **RQ1: What are the blockages to democratisation that EUDP needs to account for (Main Research Question 1).** EMBRACE hypothesizes:

H1: Behavioural, structural and institutional blockages explain de-democratisation and need to be accounted for by EUDP.

To respond to the four sub-questions connected to RQ 1, EMBRACE hypothesizes:

RQ1.a What are the EU-internal blockages that negatively influence EUDP (WP2)?

H1.a: Competing EU-internal foreign policy goals, the EU-internal rise of authoritarianism, and the EU-internal competition among different EU bodies negatively influence EUDP. [Specific patterns will be identified through empirical research in *WP2 and WP3*].

RQ1.b What are the specific patterns of behavioural, institutional and/or structural blockages that emerge in defective democracies (WP4), in authoritarian and hybrid regimes (WP5) and in post-conflict consociational regimes (WP6)?

H1.b: Constellations of blockages differ according to the political regime, the actors involved and the structural context in which they emerge. Political deadlock in the context of uprisings in democratising regimes is different from political deadlock in deeply entrenched authoritarian regimes or in post-war countries that seek to build peace. [Specific patterns will be identified through empirical research in *WP4, WP5, WP6 and WP7*] Pathways to political opening where blockages need to be overcome will differ accordingly. In all settings political actors can be identified that are change-averse and are not interested in overcoming political deadlock; they are satisfied when blockages continue to exist. [These actors, their political preferences, and their cost-benefit-analysis for deadlock and opening will be identified through empirical research in *WP4, WP5, WP6 and WP7.*]

RQ1.c What are the specific patterns of blockages to EUDP that emerge in the geopolitical and geo-economic competition between major powers (at national, regional or global level) who are rivals of EUDP (WP7)?

H1.c: Russia in the Eastern neighbourhood and Saudi Arabia in the Southern neighbourhood rival EUDP through backing anti-democratic forces politically in the domestic political arena of the EU neighbours; China reduces EU leverage through its economically-driven foreign policy in all regions. [Specific patterns will be identified through empirical research in *WP7*; all other WPs will contribute.]

RQ1.d How do blockages influence the effectiveness of EUDP? In which patterns of blockages is EUDP more, or less, effective (WP3)?

H1.d: All types of blockages negatively influence the effectiveness of EUDP. [Specific patterns will be identified through middle-n empirical research in *WP4, WP5, WP6 and WP7*. *WP3* will analyse the larger trends over 23 countries in the entire European neighbourhood.]

12.2   RQ2 on democratic openings

To continue, the *Theory Framework Paper* has discussed paths to democratic transition and the factors that are conducive to democratic opening. Democratic transition is defined as the process of moving from an authoritarian to a democratic political system. Democratic openings refer to political processes in which authoritarian or undemocratic systems are opened and democratisation becomes more likely. The outcome of democratic openings is classified into three categories: moderate institutional change, substantial institutional change, and regime change. Institutional change can mean for example the expansion of civil rights and freedoms, increased government transparency and accountability, improved governance, strengthened civil society and more rights for minorities, and improved freedom of expression.

Factors that are conducive to democratic opening have – again – been presented in three bundles: Actors-related factors, institution-related factors, and structures-related factors. The actors-related factors discusses relevant domestic political actors, the support of pro-democratic civil society and the broader public, further, the critical, but supportive media and journalists, as well as the forbearance of non-constitutional powers, and external actors as democracy promoters and supporters while authoritarian external actors are contained or neutralized. The institution-related factors addresses prior experience with democratic institutions, a smart institutional design, as well as winning public support for, and trust in,new political institutions. Finally, the structures-related factors emphasises the importance of socio-economic modernisation, the existence of a functioning well-governed effective state or stateness, as well as the existence of a political community or finished nation-building and fixed territorial borders. It is important to note, however, that these factors are not mutually exclusive and often involve a combination of these discussed factors.

As second main research question, EMBRACE asks **RQ2: How and under what conditions can the blockages to democratisation be overcome and how can EUDP contribute to creating conditions that are conducive to this process?** EMBRACE hypothesizes:

H2: Institutional and structural blockages can be overcome if behavioural blockages are solved. EUDP needs to develop strategies to incentivise non-democratic actors to support democratic reform, to mutually tolerate political adversaries and to stick to forbearance in political decision-making.

To respond to the four sub-questions connected to RQ 2, EMBRACE hypothesizes:

RQ2.a How and under what conditions can the EU make use of the variety of EUDP instruments to increase its leverage on resilient authoritarian incumbents and to support pro-democratic actors to advance democratisation (WPs 3-6)?

H2.a   The EU needs to overcome EU-internal blockages and develop a more pro-active foreign policy strategy prioritizing democratisation support to the outside. [Specific patterns and recommendations will be identified through empirical research in *WP3-6, WP2 and WP7* will contribute; all analysis feeds into *WP8*].

RQ2.b How and under what conditions can the EU complement its top-down approach to DP with a meaningful bottom-up approach to overcome blockages (WPs 3-6 and 8)?

H2.b   The EU can make use of a complementary bottom-up approach in countries that allow civil society to manoeuvre; in authoritarian regimes in which space for civil society as shrunken, the options for EUDP are limited [Specific patterns and recommendations will be

identified through empirical research in *WP3-6, WP2 and WP7* will contribute; all analysis feeds into *WP8*].

RQ2.c How and under what conditions can EUDP integrate local perspectives on democracy from various stakeholders (including women, youth and ethnic minorities) and adjust its "liberal democracy" concept to less contested forms of democracy (WPs 3-6 and 8)?

H2.c   The EU can integrate local perspectives in all forms of cooperation and at all stages of democracy promotion negotiations through systematically integrating local stakeholders of democracy promotion [Specific patterns and recommendations will be identified through empirical research in *WP3, WP4, WP5 and WP6; WP2 and WP7* will contribute; all analysis feeds into *WP8*].

RQ2.d How can EUDP countervail anti-democratic (domestic and/or geopolitical) alliances (WP7)?

H2.d   EU bodies and member states need to internally align its foreign policy goals developing and implementing a consistent and effective strategy to countervail anti-democratic alliances. The EU needs to more consequently defend democracy in its foreign relations and more consequently act upon its own values and principles. [Specific patterns and recommendations will be identified through empirical research in *WP7*; all analysis feeds into *WP8*].

In sum, EMBRACE innovatively identifies and explains blockages to democratisation in three dimensions: actors-related, institution-related and structures-related blockages. It thereby contributes to investigate the reasons for de-democratisation and autocratisation. EMBRACE suggests to tracing processes of opening to identify those factors that are conducive to overcoming blockages. EMBRACE assesses how EUDP interacts with these factors and how it can be better positioned to increase its democratising leverage and to support the development of a situation that is more conducive to democratisation. The entire scholarly analysis of the EMBRACE consortium feeds into *WP8*.

Appendix: Glossary of terms and keywords

Actors: relevant actors that influence policy- and decision-making; **---, domestic**: politically relevant actors inside a country (the "beneficiary of democracy promotion") under investigation; domestic actors include (representatives of) governments, state bureaucracies, parliaments, political parties, judiciary and representatives of local communities, civil society organisations and social movements, as well as elders, clerics and journalists; collective action (such as mass protest) and other politically relevant actors (such as non-state economic elites) can also be subsumed under domestic actors; **---, external**: relevant actors influencing policy- and decision-making from the outside of a country, either promoting democracy or backing up change-adverse domestic political actors; external actors include: states and their agencies (e.g. EU member states, UK, USA, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey), regional (e.g. EU, OSCE, European Council) and international organisations (e.g. OECD, WTO, IMF, UNO), ad-hoc coalitions of states, transnational networks, and global social movements.

Blockage: actors-, institutions- and structures- related conditions that prevent political gains from being achieved; **---, behavioural**: dysfunctional, state-capturing or anti-reform-oriented behaviour of politically relevant actors; **---, institutional**: a set of dysfunctional political institutions, that emerge as the consequence of domestic political decision-making or external octroi or that are created through the mindful exploitation and politisation of *de jure* democratic political institutions by anti-reform oriented or democracy-averse political actors; **---, structural**: emerging from administrative, socio-economic, geographical, cultural and geopolitical constraints that influence actors' preferences, that provide options for political choice and/or that inform about the power resources available to political actors; if not managed well, structural constraints transform into blockages to democratisation; **--- elites**: relevant political actors representing a group of likeminded people with similar political interests, actively opposing political change and contributing to processes of de-democratisation.

Conditionality: conditions attached to agreements that need to be fulfilled to receive rewards, such as a privileged partnership or visa facilitation; **---, political**: conditions such as progress in democratisation and an increase in the respect of human rights and the rule of law are rewarded with trade agreements, visa facilitation, among others; **---, accession**: (also called membership conditionality) as conditions, the Copenhagen criteria (country needs to be democratic, to be ready to compete on the European Single Market and to implement the aquis communautaire, the legal body of the European Union) need to be fulfilled, progress in this process is rewarded with granting candidate status, receiving financial assistance to prepare country for membership, opening of accession negotiations, and finally, membership)

Configurations: constellation of actors and alliances, institutions, and structures, including the resources for and distribution of political power, as well as the discursive and symbolic frameworks employed by politically relevant actors.

Culture: provides a toolkit from which political actors take political strategies and tactics to inform their actions.

Cultural toolkit: a collection of cultural resources that people draw on to make sense of their experiences, to communicate with others, and to build relationships; people develop strategies of action that allow them to navigate complex social situations, negotiate power dynamics, and achieve their goals employing the cultural toolkit; cultural tools are not fixed or static but are instead constantly changing and adapting to new circumstances.

De-democratisation: process of reversing democratisation, lowering democratic quality, reducing democratic freedom and strengthening authoritarian elements, even in the most mature democracies; indicates a starting point, democracy, and a direction, less democracy; does not preclude assumptions about causes, conditions, and culprits, nor about speed, extent, and endpoint; used here also synonymously to democratic backsliding or democratic regression.

Democracy: rule by the people; **---, electoral**: minimalist concept of democracy following the lines of "polyarchy" suggested by Dahl (1971) focusing on political participation rights and public contestation over voters' support; **---, embedded**: suggested by Merkel (2004) as an institutionalist-procedural understanding of democracy including three dimensions: (1) vertical legitimacy pertaining to the relationship between citizens and rulers through elections and political rights; (2) horizontal accountability encompassing liberal constitutionalism and horizontal accountability including the rule of law; and (3) effective government meaning that only duly elected representatives can make authoritative decisions. Constitutional democracies are "embedded" internally and externally. Internally, democracy is secured by the interdependence of five different partial regimes (A) a democratic electoral regime, (B) political rights of participation, (C) civil rights, (D) horizontal accountability, and, (E) the guarantee that the effective power to govern lies in the hands of democratically elected representatives. If (A) is given, a country can be called "electoral democracy"; if (B)-(D) additionally are given, a country can be called "liberal constitutional democracy". Externally, these five partial regimes are secured by a context conducive to democracy, which protects it from outer as well as inner shocks and destabilizing tendencies. The most important rings in which a democracy is externally embedded are statehood, civil society, the socio-economic context, and regional as well as international integration.

Democracy promotion: directed mechanism of external support to promote democracy in non-democratic political regimes (and/or to protect democracy in democratic political regimes); **---, direct**: democracy assistance (also named targeted democracy assistance,

democracy aid, democracy support, political aid, and/or political development aid) to directly fund political institution-building, strengthen the capacity to respect and implement human rights and the rule of law, empower political actors to play according to democratic rules, and contribute to build democratic political communities; Carothers (2009) calls direct democracy promotion the "political" approach as it directly targets the heart of the political arena and its institutions; **---, indirect**: development assistance (also named development or foreign aid) to create context conditions that are conducive for democratisation; Carothers (2009) calls this approach the "developmental" approach and focuses on socio-economic development, the building of state-capacity and the support of civil society organisations through financial and technical means; **--- and embedded democracy**: direct democracy promotion targets the core partial regimes of Merkel's embedded democracy (A-E) whereas indirect democracy promotion targets the outer rings in which the core regimes of democracy are embedded.

Diffusion: undirected mechanism of spreading norms and values over geographical and/or political boarders; **---, democratic**: spreading liberal democratic norms and values globally through mechanisms such as coercion, competition, emulation, and learning

Elite: relevant political actors representing a group of likeminded people with similar political interests, or in other terms, the leaders of this group; **---, hegemonic**: incumbent elites in authoritarian and hybrid regimes dominating the political discourse and creating legitimising narratives to create ideological hegemony; **---, contesting**: leaders of the political opposition, challenging the dominant elites and their discourse.

Episode: period in time or "choice point" when reforms, policy choices, political institutions, or other democratic claims are debated, reconstituted, or transformed, and a window of opportunity for institutional political change opens, change becomes likely (but is not necessarily the actual outcome); **--- of political deadlock**: allows to study the persistence of blockages as change is effectively prevented; **--- of political opening**: allows to study the overcoming of blockages as change is fostered. Episodes reflect a shared, theory-driven periodisation, employed as a methodological tool for the empirical-analytical comparative analysis in EMBRACE.

European Neighbourhood: 23 neighbouring countries, located eastward and southward to the territory of the European Union including Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Kosovo, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, North Macedonia, Palestine (Gaza and West Bank), Serbia, Syria, Turkey, Tunisia, and Ukraine.

European Neighbourhood Policy: policy instrument of the European Union intended to facility cooperation and exchange with neighbouring countries.

Enlargement Policy: policy instrument of the European Union to prepare approximation and accession to the European Union as a member state with all rights and duties that membership implies.

Gain: contextually meaningful change in institutional, policy, organisational, discursive, and/or ideational terms that contribute to democratisation processes; **---, democratic**: change that increases the quality of democracy within a political system.

Peace: in a lean definition, a state of period in which there is no war or war has ended; in a more demanding understanding, peace means both a lack of conflict and freedom from fear of violence between individuals or groups; **----building**: ending violent conflict or war, building trust among the members of a society.

Popular uprising: act or instance of mass mobilisation and rising up from the bottom-up against incumbents in power constituting moments of high fluidity and desectoralisation; frequently, popular uprising leads to new configurations (of actors, institutions, structures, cultural habits) that are amenable to certain democratic gains being made, but can also create new blockages.

Narrative: (1) a story or account of events, experiences, or the like, whether true or fictitious; (2) the art, technique, or process of narrating, or of telling a story; **--- in an authoritarian regime**: in authoritarian (and also at times in hybrid regimes), hegemonic elites control society both through coercive and soft power means; a narrative is a soft power mean and serves the purpose to manufacture cultural or ideological consent within a society and with the hegemonic incumbent; **---, hegemonic**: hegemonic ideology consist of a set of hegemonic narratives presenting a glorified version of existing socio-economic and political arrangements based on, amongst others, hegemonic narratives of national unity, development and growth; such narratives can be transmitted via a variety of channels and practices, e.g. through official state communication, propaganda through government-controlled media and education, through popular culture or through compliant civil society, such as political parties, trade unions, the church or public intellectuals; **--- and hegemonic elites**: hegemonic elites create and defend legitimising narratives that are at times contested by the opposition, represented by **contesting elites**.

Stakeholder: a person, group or organization with a vested interest, or stake, in political decision-making on political reforms, here particularly concerning issues of democratisation and democracy promotion; stakeholders can be members of the organization they have a stake in, or they can have no official affiliation.

Trajectories: regime type and its selected modus of reform to drive further or prevent political change to happen**; --- to democratisation:** political regimes and their way to democratisation; in the European Neighbourhood, three trajectories can be differentiated: (1) defective democracies and hybrid regimes that chose a trajectory of moderate democratisation (e.g. Albania, Armenia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Turkey), occasionally in the aftermath of popular uprisings (e.g. Serbia after the Bulldozer Revolution in 2000, Georgia after the Rose Revolution in 2003, Ukraine after the Orange Revolution in 2004, to a larger extent Tunisia and, to a minor extent,

Morocco after the Arab Spring in 2011); (2) authoritarian regimes that at best pay lip service to democratisation demands or, more frequently, reject such demands (e.g. Algeria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Palestine, Syria); and (3) post-war political regimes whose (sometimes externally imposed) consociational democratic institutions have led to crisis-prone types of stalemate, hindering further democratisation (e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Lebanon).

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