

# EMBRACE POLICY BRIEF 01



## Emerging patterns of blockages to peace and democratisation

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**EMBRACE**



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# 1 Introduction to the EMBRACE project

The EMBRACE research project (2022-25) collects evidence-based knowledge on the obstacles to democratisation and ways to overcome them in five regions of the European neighbourhood: Southern Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, Middle East and North Africa. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and pro-democracy forces to develop effective strategies to promote democratic progress in the European neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, new policy tools for EUDP practitioners and pro-democracy activists are developed based on the project's findings.

The EMBRACE consortium consists of 14 partner organisations based in 13 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development.



Empirical data was gathered in twelve case study countries through a variety of research approaches, investigating episodes of political closure and opening to identify, analyse and explain behavioural, institutional and structural blockages, and the conditions under which they can be overcome. A new quantitative dataset was generated on the larger trends of EU Democracy Promotion and its effects on democratisation over the last two decades in all 23 neighbours.

The research is structured around four thematic clusters: the re-configurations for democratic policy shifts after popular uprisings; democratisation and economic modernisation in authoritarian and hybrid regimes; the nexus between democratisation and peace; and the geopolitics of EUDP and the competition that the EU encounters in its democracy promotion efforts.

WP6 investigates how blockages to peace and democratisation are linked. It explores the linkages between escalating conflict dynamics and the stagnation or backsliding of democratisation processes. Moreover, WP6 assesses in which ways the EU's approach to democratisation and peace can be adjusted to support the emergence of peaceful socio-political orders in conflict-affected societies more effectively. Empirically, this WP analyses the cases of Armenia (UGent), Algeria (ARI), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Nansen Dialogue Centre), Lebanon (Berghof), Palestine (PalThink) and Tunisia (UMAN). Research teams have been in the field to collect empirical information through the methods of semi-structured interviews and focus groups between October 2023 and April 2024.

## 2 Key research summary and policy recommendations

### 2.1 Conflicts tend to escalate in the multipolar order

Most of the conflict contexts studied in this Work Package have in recent years shown signs of conflict escalation. Palestine and Nagorno-Karabakh have collapsed into war and/or ethnic cleansing. While the conflicts in Lebanon and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have remained frozen, counter-peace dynamics are threatening the long-established stalemates: Lebanon's Hezbollah is currently fighting a shadow war with Israel, which may still escalate further. Meanwhile, separatist the Bosnian Serb leadership is destabilising BiH through its obstructionist policies.

Many of these escalation processes are proxy wars between rising powers in the multipolar order or between them and the West (Richmond et al., 2023; Pogodda et al., 2022, 2023). This constitutes a new East-West confrontation with potential allies in the Global South torn between the two blocs (Ikenberry, 2024). While rising powers such as Russia and Iran have often fuelled conflicts, EU involvement in conflicts is widely regarded as inconsistent, if not hypocritical. The EU has supported human rights in some contexts (e.g. Ukraine) with a large range of military, financial and diplomatic instruments, while only deploying rhetoric and humanitarian aid (e.g. in Gaza) or prioritising cheap oil supplies over human rights (e.g. in Nagorno-Karabakh) in other conflicts. Western hypocrisies have led to an isolation of the EU in the Global South. It also led to unbalanced peace processes, in which countries with strong external support (e.g. Turkey's support for Azerbaijan, Russia's intervention on the Syrian regime's behalf, US support for Israel) have forced the weaker conflict parties into



unsustainable compromises. Yet, the EU could recover its international legitimacy if it acted as a reliable partner for peace and systematically defended human rights, women's rights, accountability and justice.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

🌱 For the EU to be a reliable *partner for peace* in conflict context, it will need to systematically prioritise human rights, justice and civil society's demands for peaceful social order over geopolitical interests.

More concretely in our cases this means:

🌱 Align economic, security and diplomatic leverages<sup>1</sup> (beyond rhetoric) in the Israel/Palestine conflict to 1) help end the war on Gaza, 2) push for a new peace process as the only way to avoid further atrocities on both sides and 3) assert pressure on Israel and Hezbollah to cease conflict escalation.

🌱 Support Armenia in their efforts to negotiate a just peace.

🌱 Use financial and political leverages to stop Serbia and Croatia from supporting secessionist leaders in BiH.


## 2.2 Stabilisation approaches have undermined peace

As our research has shown, stabilisation approaches can dampen or freeze wars in the short-term, but are counterproductive in the long run. The power-sharing peace agreements of the 1990s have ended the wars in BiH and Lebanon, but have created fragile stalemates (Pogodda et al., 2023). Power-sharing has allowed former warlords to run economies and public sectors as their personal fiefdoms (Azzam and Dudouet, 2024; Šavija-Valha et al, 2024). The resulting patronage systems, illicit economies and pervasive corruption have impoverished societies and generated man-made disasters (such as the Beirut port explosion). The EU's stabilisation approach in BiH and Lebanon has inadvertently financed these corrupt elites and their project of state and peace capture. In Armenia, the prioritisation of stability focused EU engagement on 'resilience-building', support for internally displaced persons and crisis management (Luciani, 2024).


In Palestine, stabilisation implied financing a Palestinian Authority (PA) and its security forces, who operated without a democratic or political legitimacy (i.e. PA since 2006) and helped shore up the military / civilian occupation of Palestine (Tartir, 2015). While the EU's discourse has consistently criticised Israel's settlement project and recently its war on Gaza, the EU has also afforded Israel significant privileges. With a war-induced famine looming in Gaza and Israel's continuous bombardment of crowded civilian neighbourhoods, attacks on Palestinian health infrastructure, aid workers and journalists, the EU needs to reconsider those privileges until a ceasefire is established and the start of a peace process is agreed. The focus on stabilisation and the failure to create peace processes that eradicate popular grievances has allowed wars to spread, destabilising the EU in return.


<sup>1</sup> The EU has a large range of instruments to draw on: incentives such as a Special Partnership with the EU, sanctions such as the suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement (as Israel's largest trading partner) and support mechanism such as using EUBAM and EUPOL COPPS to re-establish order in Palestine (Asseburg, 2024).

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

 The EU needs to replace its stabilisation approach with a more pro-active foreign policy aimed at the return to peace and democratisation processes.

More concretely this means in our cases:

 Help level the power asymmetry between Israel and Palestine in future peace negotiations to avoid biased outcomes such as the Oslo Process.


 Push for anti-corruption measures (jointly monitored by civil society and international actors) in places like Lebanon and BiH to dismantle systemic corruption, patronage systems and criminal networks.

## 2.3 Linked blockages at the national level

In our case studies, blockages to peace and democratisation processes are linked in various ways. Structural violence, for instance, has blocked both peace and democratisation processes. In the absence of socio-economic improvements in their daily lives, populations in marginalised regions came to reject both processes. The replacement of competitive politics by elite bargains between the major parties has further alienated large segments of society from democracy and peace in Lebanon, Algeria and Tunisia (Azzam and Dudouet, 2024; Boubekour, 2024; Pogodda, 2024).

Moreover, securitized forms of statebuilding have shifted resources away from public services (especially health and education) and towards security agencies (Richmond, 2014). In particular, the EU's interest in stemming immigration has led to a distorted statebuilding process in countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, Armenia and Lebanon (Azzam and Dudouet, 2024; Boubekour, 2024; Pogodda, 2024). Tunisia also illustrates how a lack of security sector reforms can block peace and democratisation: the behaviour of unreformed security agencies has fuelled the conflict between social movements and the coercive state apparatus, while also allowing Tunisia's autocratic president Kais Saied to find a power base in the unreformed Ministry of the Interior (Pogodda, 2024).

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

 Strengthen independent oversight mechanisms (independent media, watchdogs, anticorruption institutions) to increase transparency.

 Support the creation of nation-wide discussion forums on a fair distribution of resources in stagnating conflict / democratisation contexts.

 Reorient statebuilding towards the creation of functioning social services and away from reinforcing coercive security institutions.

## 2.4 Linked blockages in society

On the societal level, the fragmentation of civil society has been identified as the most common blockage to both, peace and democratisation. In Algeria, Armenia, BiH, Lebanon and Tunisia, mass mobilisation had highlighted widely shared grievances and briefly created a window of opportunity to transform social and political orders. Subsequent divisions within civil society have undermined the search for alternatives to failing economic models and stagnating peace

and democratisation processes, however. The failure to build a united front against illegitimate governments has allowed regimes to adapt and marginalise civil society. In Algeria, the fragmentation of civil society resulted from the co-optation of some groups and the marginalisation of others in a divide-and-conquer approach (Boubekour, 2024). In Lebanon, Tunisia, BiH, and Armenia our fieldwork identified the 'projectisation' or 'NGO-isation' as crucial to the depoliticisation and fragmentation of civil society (Azzam and Dudouet, 2024; Šavija-Valha et al. 2024; Pogodda, 2024). Here, external funding for NGOs has kept civil society in a perpetual state of competition and focused them on minor projects. This prevented the collaborative development of new approaches to tackle grievances. Moreover, large-scale funding of some select NGOs has alienated social movements and thus driven a wedge between political activists. Forums to bring activists together across such divides could thus be useful to infuse peace and democratisation processes with new ideas.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✚ Redirect civil society funding towards collaborative projects, working on overarching issues such as how to overcome the stagnation of peace and democratisation processes.
- ✚ Support the creation of nation-wide dialogue forums on the failings of democratisation and peace processes (such as Bosnia's 'Citizens' Assembly') and leverage aid to support their demands.
- ✚ Identify and start engaging with change-makers in stagnating conflict contexts, including in social movements.

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