EMBRACE
Working Paper 01

Contentious Politics After Popular Uprising: Assessing How EU Democracy Promotion Can Help Bottom-Up Actors Achieve Small Scale Democratic Gains

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To cite: Sarah Anne Rennick et al. 2024. EMBRACE Working Paper 1. Contentious Politics after Popular Uprising: Assessing How EU Democracy Promotion Can Help Bottom-Up Actors Achieve Small-Scale Democratic Gains. EMBRACE Project Publications.

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EMBRACE Consortium

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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.

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1. Introduction

Popular uprisings demanding democratic reforms – which can range from mass revolutionary movements calling for the ouster of authoritarian regimes to electoral protests aimed at political elites - are rarely discrete events with neat outcomes. They are messy, ambiguous, and politically contingent periods of struggle in which institutional features, relational dynamics, and discursive/normative frameworks are in flux. And importantly, these contexts of fluidity often continue in a larger time frame, even after moment of mass mobilization comes to an end. Indeed, the aftermath of a mass popular uprising is rarely a clear-cut return to the status quo ante or a decisive move to a new system of government, but rather a longer transitional period in which a range of different outcomes can be registered simultaneously. These transitional periods, which can last anywhere from several months to several years, create what Roberts (2015) calls 'choice points' when reforms, policy choices, institutions, or other democratic claims are debated, reconstituted, or transformed.

One of the distinctive features of post-uprising periods is the continued mobilization and claim-making by bottom-up actors, albeit on smaller scales, implying the continuous negotiation and struggle over the new political and social order to be erected. In theorizing the relationship between popular uprisings and democratization, Della Porta (2016) problematizes the seeming lack of success of mass mobilization 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 overarching demands are not met, what she refers to as "eventful democratization." In observing post-uprising episodes of contentious politics since 2000, we see such dynamics on display. Regardless of overall outcome of the popular uprisings and the extent to which they produced significant systemic change, social movement action was able to successfully register some democratic gains, lending credence to the consensus across the literature that democratic development is an extended and non-linear process.

Yet this empirical observation requires further unpacking if we are to contribute to understanding the relationship between revolution, social movement action, and democratization. What factors explain the success of bottom-up actors in achieving democratic gains via contentious politics, despite diverging outcomes of the mass popular

uprising in terms of democratic transition vs. systemic reproduction? Answering this question necessitates investigating how popular uprisings produce high fluidity and strategic contingency in institutional, relational, and discursive terms that lead to new configurations (Ouaissa, Pannewick, and Strohmaier 2021) that are amenable to certain democratic gains being made and, importantly, also create new blockages. Such investigation entails a deep dive into domestic institutional arrangements, relational dynamics, and discursive-symbolic processes at both the macro- and micro-levels that produce the possibilities for both democratic opening and blockage, depending on the combination of configurations and strategic interactions (Jasper 2011, 2015). It also entails investigating the role of external actors and how their various forms of intervention interact with domestic factors. Such research has not only academic but also practitioner value: given that there is no singular pathway to democracy, and that popular uprisings provoke a window of opportunity where structural indeterminacy provides the possibility of democratic gain, what external interventions are actually effective in promoting democracy post-popular uprising?

In partial response to these questions, this paper assesses the effectiveness of the European Union and its democracy promotion tools and diplomatic efforts (EUDP) in helping bottom-up actors secure smaller democratic gains in the aftermath of popular uprisings. The paper involves a comparative analysis of 21 episodes of post-uprising contentious politics across nine countries that figure into the EU's neighbourhood policy framework: Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Serbia, North Macedonia, Belarus, Georgia, and Armenia. All countries are recipients of EUDP and in all cases the EU has viewed the instance of popular uprising as an opportunity to further promote democracy, albeit to varying degrees and with different sets of tools and resources available. Drawing on archival research, event data analysis, and over 150 interviews with public authorities, EU representatives, and social movement actors across the nine countries under investigation, this paper specifically investigates not the transition to democracy itself but rather how EUDP in post-uprising contexts interacted with small-scale episodes of contentious politics, and the extent to which EUDP actually helped bottom-up actors successfully push for democratic gains.

Through case-oriented comparative analysis, the paper finds six common mechanisms underlying the success of bottom-up actors in achieving small-scale democratic gains in the aftermath of popular uprisings, which we term capital, formal bridges, technical alignment, constellation of power, quality of coalition, and civil society autonomy. Effective EUDP, in turn, can be identified when EU tools (financial, discursive, technical, economic, or other) deployed for the purpose of promoting democracy contribute to producing, supporting, or reinforcing these mechanisms. However, the research also finds that EUDP can work at cross-purposes to supporting pro-democracy bottom-up actors and can in fact have the consequence of supporting anti-democratic processes or autocratic tendencies among those in power.

Ultimately, the paper finds that EUDP is best able to assist bottom-up actors to achieve small-scale democratic gains when such gains are seen as contributing to stabilization of the new democratic regime.

2. EUDP and Support to Popular Uprising and Democratic Activism

The research on the EU's role in supporting popular uprisings and democratic 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) work on the intersection of EUDP and the Arab Spring uprisings, for example, finds that the EU was largely absent during the initial years of mass mobilization and transitional contexts, favouring stability over change in light of a perceived threat of radicalism. This course only changed later on, but with EUDP being deployed through democratic reform-oriented policies at the institutional level as opposed to direct support to activists seeking democratization. While this included new initiatives and funding mechanisms that member states and the EU institutions introduced, along both pressure and incentives linked to democratic change, the net result has been limited. Stephan, Lakhani, and Naviwala (2015), meanwhile, point to the mismatch between funding logics and mechanisms of institutional donor bodies, who work at the formal organizational level, and grassroots activism and social movements, whose modes of organization prevent access to classic aid. Indeed, 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 institutionalized 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 for democratic popular movements in autocratic countries, such as Belarus, has limited reach and impact because of the high level

of repression and the existence of a hostile legal and political environments for these movement (Bosse, 2021). Chenoweth and Stephan (2021) find that direct funding has few generalizable effects on movement characteristics or outcomes, and can perhaps even lead to demobilization 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 – contradicting the findings of Rodriguez Prieto. 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 'NGOization' and the depoliticization 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). Such critiques of external assistance to popular uprisings and nonviolent action under authoritarian regimes are well situated in empirical analysis, although have been less theoretically articulated.

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 et al. (2022) indicate that external aid is often undertaken haphazardly and without insights drawn from either scholarship or activist practice. This paper contributes to this literature by exploring the specific tools of EUDP and how these interact with episodes of contentious politics seeking democratic gains. In addition to our own analysis based on our analytical model (below), this paper also places emphasis on the perspective of bottom-up actors regarding which forms of intervention and support were or would have been useful or, on the contrary, were harmful to achieving small-scale democratic gain.

3. Theorizing How EUDP Interacts with Contentious Politics

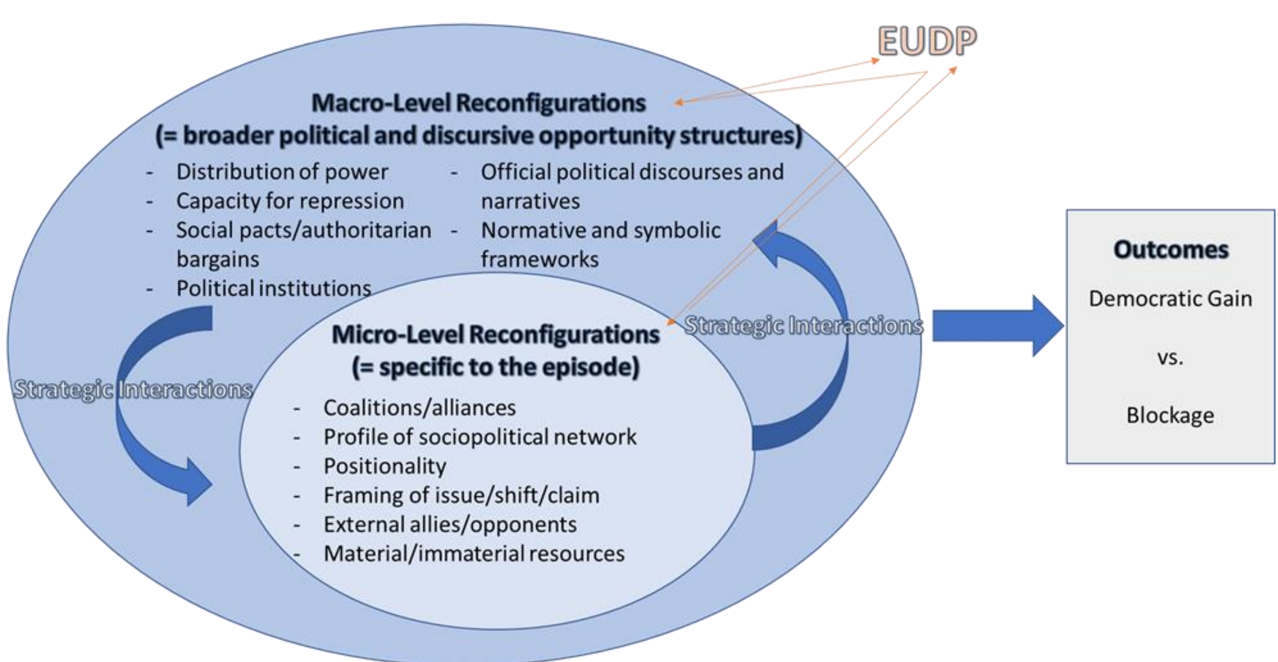
Our overall theoretical argument is that small-scale democratic gains made by bottom-up actors engaged in contentious politics in post-uprising periods result from the re-shaped institutional, relational, and discursive conditions that moments of mass mobilization and transition produce – regardless of overall outcome of a popular uprising. These reconfigurations at both the macro- and micro-levels can provide the conditions for achieving democratic gains – or indeed create a set of interlocking factor that block bottom-up actors in seeing their demands be met. EUDP, for its part, interacts with these macro- and micro-level

configurations in a manner that can be either helpful or harmful to bottom-up actors and their pursuits.

Our point of departure is an understanding of how the popular uprising changes conditions that allow for new democratic gains to be made, or indeed blocked, by reshaping the constellation of actors and alliances, institutions, structure and distribution of power, and discursive and symbolic frameworks. Building on Dinçer and Hecan (2020), we argue that post-uprising periods are characterized by structural indeterminacy in which the ambiguous and contingent processes unleashed during the moment of mass mobilization produce complex and uncertain dynamics in which political developments both in favour of and against democratization coexist in a degree of tension. The uncertainty of post-uprising transitional processes opens a range of possible choices and, hence, outcomes that become available (Capoccia and Keleman 2007, Roberts 2015). As Tilly (2006) argues, this uncertainty before a new political order stabilizes allows for increased margins of political manoeuvre and processes of change.

Central to our argument are the various reconfigurations (Ouaissa, Pannewick, and Strohmaier 2021) that occur at the macro- and micro-levels that change the conditions in which contentious politics takes place. 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 new and/or competing normative and symbolic frameworks, collective action frames, and shared narratives. These macro-level and micro-level reconfigurations underlie the episodes of contentious politics and explain outcomes, i.e. whether small-scale democratic change is successfully achieved or blocked. EUDP, for its parts, interacts with both these macro- and micro-level reconfigurations.

The theoretical framework can be visualized as:



4. Method and Materials

The research involves a case-oriented comparative analysis (Ragin 2000, della Porta 2008) of 21 episodes of contentious politics across nine countries: Algeria Tunisia, Lebanon, Serbia, North Macedonia, Belarus, Georgia, and Armenia.

Case-oriented, as opposed to variable-oriented, comparative research relies on the selection of cases (here, the episodes of contentious politics) that reflect a shared, theory-driven periodization, with selection on the dependent variable (here, small-scale democratic gain). The comparative method is used to explore similar mechanisms and processes, with emphasis on thick description to generate generalizable knowledge. The benefit in conducting case-oriented comparative analysis is that it provides the opportunity to conduct comparative analysis both in most-similar systems and most-different systems design.

The episodes selected for the research all emanate from the larger popular uprisings that each country experienced, and involve claim-making around specific reforms, policy choices, institutional framework, or other demands aiming at more inclusive and participatory politics. In this sense episodes represent cases where there was effort to achieve a smaller-scale change that can be characterized as both democratic and that challenge status quo or anti-democratic power dynamics in the country context. In other words, what constitutes an episode is context-specific and justifiable in the country context. The episodes under

investigation are not purely top-down led but rather those that come from social forces or actors vying for pro-democratic changes (NGOs, sociopolitical networks, activists, opposition parties, unions, etc.). Likewise, the episodes selected reflect a periodization that corresponds with the theoretical understanding of the uprising/post-uprising period. In this way, episodes can be both those occurring during the period of acute uprising or political crisis itself (i.e. when protests are happening and institutional, relational, and ideational configurations are constantly shifting) or the short-term aftermath when new configurations are produced (but before things fully "settle" into a new period of stasis.) Finally, in order to gain further analytical leverage, for each country case, at least one episode where democratic gain was achieved, and one episode of where social movement actors were blocked, was assessed.

Methodology for the research relies on multiple triangulation (Denzin 2009; Fusch et al 2018) situated within qualitative methodologies. This entailed: the gathering of diverse empirical materials, including both those that are publicly available as well as the generation of original materials; the use of different methodologies for the generation of data, including both desk research/archival research and the conducting of semi-structured interviews with bottom-up actors, authorities where possible, and EU officials; and the application of different data analysis methods at the level of individual episodes (discourse analysis, frame analysis, and narrative analysis) to complement the case-oriented comparative analysis.

Country and Popular Uprising	Selected Episodes and Outcome	Short Description	Materials Gathered
Serbia and the Buldozer Revolution of October 2000 that ushered in about 16 years of democratic politics.	Workers' Mobilization of 2001. No democratic gain.	Failure of two waves of worker mobilization during the year 2001 to win meaningful policy concessions from the new reformist government of Serbia, or indeed to gain recognition of the legitimacy of workers' participation in shaping the model of market reform being implemented in the wake of the mass uprising.	16 total semi-structured interviews with activists, experts, and political elites close to the ruling party (DOS).
	2001 Status of Ethnic Albanians in the Preševo Valley. Democratic gain.	Armed rebellion in three southern municipalities of Serbia in the Preševo Valley, alongside the border with Kosovo, which ended with de-escalation of the conflict, and then later sustainable implementation of the liberalizing reform envisaged by the negotiated settlement.	Media reports, activists' statements from different historical sources, testimonials from secondary literature.
	Politization of Sexuality at the 2001 Belgrade Pride. No	2001 LBGT Pride parade, that ended with "stampede" violence and more than 40 activists being injured despite police presence, highlighting the fracturing of	

	democratic gain.	cooperation between different social actor to achieve political goals and polarization around identity and rights-based issues.	
North Macedonia and sustained mass mobilization in 2015-2016, calling for the resignation of the government and democratic transition.	2015-2016 Demand for Inclusion in Crisis Resolution Process. No democratic gain.	Demands for a mandatory inclusion of independent CSO representatives in the crisis resolution failed and the protests resulted instead in cooptation of CSO leaders.	15 total semi-structured interviews with activists, EU representatives, and political elites close to the ruling party (VMRO). Media reports, official documents, monographs and academic and think tank articles containing accounts of participant observation and testimonials. Social media posts of key actors.
	2015 Demand for Withdraw of Presidential Pardon. Democratic gain.	Following immense pressure, including a new wave of protests, the President withdrew his decision to pardon those suspected of wrongdoing and corruption within the ruling VMRO-DPMNE party and the opposition.	
Tunisia and the 2011 revolution, followed by a decade long period of democratic transition before ending in incumbent-led autocratic restoration in 2021.	Feminist Mobilization and Changes to the 2014 Constitution. Democratic gain.	Feminist networks and groups were able to come to link the achievement of women's equality with the democratization process and the drafting of the 2014 constitution, ultimately establishing a broad coalition of civil society and political actors and successfully changing the wording of women's status in the constitution.	21 total semi-structured interviews with social movement actors representing the episodes under investigation here; political authorities and political party representatives from the periodization in question; journalists; and EU representatives carried out in March-April 2024 in Tunis and online. Public statements and protest materials (pamphlets, iconography, press interviews). One roundtable discussion with pro-democracy civil society
	2011 Union of Unemployed Graduates' Mobilization for the Right to Work. No democratic gain.	Mobilization of the Union of Unemployed Graduates (UdC) regarding the right to decent work. While the UdC initially became a focal point on the issue of unemployment as was able to influence public discourse and the agenda of the interim transitional authority, by 2013 the organization faced repression by authorities and marginalization by other bottom-up actors.	
	2011-2013 Transitional Justice Mobilization. Partial democratic gain.	While Tunisian bottom-up forces did successfully advocate for transitional justice and have a significant degree of influence in the draft law and institutional framework for the Truth and Dignity Commission, key issues related to torture,	

		abuses, and regional deprivation were left out.	actors regarding EUDP and its relationship to Tunisia's democratic transition (online, July 2023). Official documents and key statements regarding EUDP and the EU's position towards Tunisia.
Algeria and the 2019 Hirak mass protest movement, marked by weekly mass protests for over a year demanding the instauration of a civilian state and eventually ending in the military's reproduction of the power status quo.	Protest to Block the Electoral Process of July 2019. Democratic gain.	Within the context of post-Bouteflika transition, protestors of the 2019 Hirak movement maintained bi-weekly mass protests against the proposed elections, successfully convincing a number of candidates to not participate and leading the Constitutional Council to declare that not enough candidates were taking part and the interim government to subsequently cancel the elections.	17 total semi-structured interviews with social movement actors representing the episodes under investigation here; political authorities and political party representatives from the periodization in question; journalists; and EU representatives carried out in March-April 2024 in Algiers, London, and online. Public statements and protest materials (pamphlets, iconography, press interviews). Official documents and key statements regarding EUDP and the EU's position towards Algeria.
	2019 Mobilization of Magistrates for Judicial Independence. No democratic gain.	For nine days in October-November 2019, virtually the entire magistrature went on an unprecedented strike to protest the reshuffling of colleagues and demanding the independence of the judiciary, which was met with violent repression. However, the strike came to a quick resolution following a meeting between the head of the National Judges' Union and the General Secretary of the Minister of Justice, where retroactive salary increases were agreed upon, revealing rifts can be exploited for cooptation.	

<table>
<tr>
<td rowspan="2">Lebanon and the 2019 October Revolution, a mass protest movement calling for the complete overhaul of the sectarian political system and wholesale ejection of the political ruling class, without success.</td>
<td>2019 Save the Bisri Valley Campaign. Democratic gain.</td>
<td>The Save the Bisri Valley Campaign stopped the World Bank-funded Bisri Dam construction for being inefficient, costly and environmentally unsound. Confronting the patronage system, the campaign engaged in connecting issue-based activism to radical political action.</td>
<td rowspan="2">14 semi-structured interviews with activists and experts directly involved in the selected episodes, political figures, MPs from emerging political movements and lawyers from grass-movements within the protest movements.

EU public material and statement and public data available on the judiciary law.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independence of the Judiciary Efforts Post-2019. No democratic gain.</td>
<td>A civil society-drafted law on judicial independence and transparency was submitted by nine MPs to Parliament in September 2018. Lawmakers slowly studied the bill over two years (also slowed down by the pandemic and the port explosion, when finally the parliamentary committee announced it would introduce amendments without providing transparency or democratic oversight procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td rowspan="2">Ukraine and the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, allowing for the emergence of openings for certain structural reforms.</td>
<td>Launching of the National Anticorruption Buro of Ukraine (NABU) 2014. Democratic gain.</td>
<td>Soon after the Revolution of Dignity, and fulfilling the demand from the civil society, Ukraine started complex anticorruption reform. At the core of it was the creation of the new law enforcement body – NABU, which was supposed to deal with high-level corruption. Despite obstacles and attacks on the institution from the old (and sometimes new) elites, NABU survived and remains one of the essential pillars of the Ukrainian democratic future.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amending of the Election Legislation 2019. Partial democratic gain.</td>
<td>Following the Revolution of Dignity and the first post-revolution parliamentary elections, a group of election professionals, together with civil society and EU experts, started to advocate for adopting a new election code. However, soon after the negotiations on the Code started, then governing parties began to resist and</td>
</tr>
</table>

		managed to postpone the activation of the Code after the parliamentary elections in 2019. However, a new Election Code is now in force.	
	Mobilization around Judicial Reform. No democratic gain.	Increasing the independence, transparency, and fairness of the Ukrainian judiciary has long been a topic of negotiations between the EU and Ukraine. After the Revolution of Dignity, despite some formal moves along the advice of the EU and local civil society experts, the Ukrainian government, parliament, and judiciary itself failed to reach meaningful changes in the system.	
Belarus and mass electoral and anti-government protests 2020, comprising different networks and sectors of society including a previously apolitical civil society, culminating in severe repression and regime maintenance.	Formation of the Coordination Council 2020. Democratic gain.	After the 2020 elections, the Coordination Council of the Belarusian opposition was formed to dispute the outcome of the elections, bringing together various sectors of society, uniting the opposition and emerging nodes of revolution.	20 semi-structured interviews with experts, civil society actors and EU officials. Reports by the EU, think tanks, UN. Official documents related to democracy support and Belarus from the EU, such as Council Conclusions.
	Democratic closure: authoritarian consolidation in Belarus conducted by the regime after 2020. Democratic opening: institutionalization and further democratisation of the democratic forces in exile, and continued, covert resistance within Belarus.	The Belarusian regime cracked down on the protestors in Belarus from September 2020. Coupled with other measures of repression, open and public moblization of people against the regime is no longer possible. This is coupled with the democratic forces moving into exile. From exile, these democratic forces engage in ongoing institutionalization and democratization of the democratic structures. Furthermore, they engage in building institutional links with entities such as the EU. Meanwhile, in Belarus, mobilization and resistance against the regime takes place in a covert, undercover way. These activities are also supported by external actor.	
Georgia and the Rose Revolution of 2003, one of from series of coloured	Anti-Corruption Mobilization 2001. Democratic gain.	In 2001, several NGOs were included in an anti-corruption coordination council to elaborate the anti-corruption strategy. Shortly thereafter, however, civil society realized that the government was not	Archival press materials (newspapers, TV, online news platforms, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)

revolutions that took place across the post-soviet space during the 2000s.		going to tackle corruption seriously. Consequently, they united behind the opposition and supplied them with policy ideas, helping raise the expectations of the broader public and consolidate its support behind the new government.	9 total semi-structured interviews with civil society/activists political elites, the EU representatives, and observers/experts.
	Judicial Reform Mobilization in 2004. No democratic gain.	The jury system was one of the many reforms that civil society hoped the new authorities would implement, believing that greater public involvement would enhance trust in the judiciary and act as a check on both corruption and political control by the executive. However, the introduction of the jury system was repeatedly postponed. When it was finally implemented in 2011 - seven years later - it was limited to certain types of cases, therefore too limited to have a real impact.	
Armenia and the Velvet Revolution of 2018, resulting in regime change and an ongoing reform movement.	Anti-Corruption Mobilization 2018-2022. Democratic gain.	Shortly following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, an anti-corruption narrative surfaced, raising expectations of the broader public and inspiring many civil society organizations that had been pushing for reform for decades and saw a window of opportunity. This successfully led to an oversight and consultation role for civil society, leading to an overall anti-corruption legal framework. A number of new anti-corruption institutions were created (with an active input from civil society) and started functioning. The Anti-Corruption Committee, established in 2021 has investigated 1,801 cases in 2023. Anti-Corruption Court was established in 2022. It is currently considering a case against former President Kocharyan.	8 total semi-structured interviews with civil society representatives, political elites, and observers/experts. Archival press materials. Government reports, strategy papers Reports of international organisations and Armenian NGOs Websites of relevant state agencies and NGOs
	Mobilization around the Vetting of Judges, as part of Judicial Reform, 2020-2021. No democratic gain.	In May 2020, civil society organizations presented a package to the government designed to implement effective vetting of judges. While this was initially discussed after the Velvet Revolution, the word “vetting” was dropped. Despite recognizing the importance of a thorough vetting process for judicial and law enforcement positions, legislative advancements were minimal.	

Finally, the case-oriented comparative analysis is broken down into three parts. First, the research identifies the common, consistent macro- and micro-level reconfigurations across the above-listed episodes in order to establish the mechanisms that elucidate the success/blockage of bottom-up actors in achieving small-scale democratic gains in post-uprising contexts. Here, mechanisms are not understood as sequences of action leading to causal outcomes but rather the patterns of macro- and micro-level configurations that explain the complexity of relationships between constituent parts of a complex unity. Second, the analysis then considers how EUDP interacted with these mechanisms, or indeed did not interact, and the associated relationship to the success or blockage of bottom-up actors in achieving democratic gains. Finally, the analysis considers more broadly the unintended consequences of EUDP, alongside other EU forms of intervention and interaction, on transitional post-uprising contexts and the broader tendencies towards democratization vs. autocratization.

5. Mechanisms Underlying Small-Scale Democratic Gains

In considering the ensemble of episodes comprised in this research, the comparative analysis reveals six common mechanisms underlying the success of bottom-up actors in achieving small-scale democratic gains via contentious politics in post-uprising periods of structural indeterminacy. These are:

- the degree of capital of bottom-up actors;
- the existence of formal bridges between the bottom-up actors and decisions-makers;
- the technical alignment of bottom-up and top-down actors on democratic choice points;
- the constellation of actors in power;
- the quality of coalition among bottom-up actors; and
- the degree of civil society autonomy.

Importantly, as the analysis reveals, these mechanisms are not alone enough to explain the achievement of democratic gains, but rather work together in various permutations to lead to either successful/unsuccessful outcomes.

Capital of Bottom-Up Actors

Across the episodes, a consistent trend is that social movement and civil society actors that existed prior to the popular uprising proved those most able to successfully establish

themselves as key interlocutors with authorities and representatives of the popular will in transitional processes. The analysis demonstrates that these bottom-up actors were able to nimbly leverage their existing skillset and diverse and pre-existing material and immaterial resources to seize the opportunity the fluid context provided. Most importantly, these bottom-up actors that pre-dated the popular uprising had networks that could be quickly mobilized, had already undertaken the long process of developing collective action frames with their various constituents and targeted audiences to build consensus around key issues, and had the know-how to take the lead in bottom-up organizing and carry-out sustained pressure and advocacy. As such, they were able to put pressure on transitional authorities in a continuous manner, were viewed with a good degree of legitimacy by both average citizens and transitional authorities, and had an established degree of professional competency. This ensemble of knowledge and know-how, acquired prior to the popular uprising and translatable into successful claim-making processes in the post-uprising period, is referred to here as *capital*.

In Armenia, for example, a fairly institutionalised NGO sector with a more recently developed grassroots activism and experience with issue-specific campaigns, known as “civic initiatives” (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2021), allowed civil society to play a pivotal role during the 2018 Velvet Revolution. In particular, however, it was NGOs that had been in the field for a decade and more and who had experienced a process of gradual capacity building that had prepared them to step up their activities after the Velvet Revolution and efficiently use the window of opportunity. While the mass mobilisation of 2018 started with a narrow demand for Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan’s resignation, the anti-corruption narrative started surfacing fairly soon thereafter. This raised expectations of the broader public and inspired many civil society organisations that had been pushing for reform for decades. Drawing on this collective consensus and shared framing, they positioned themselves as the new government’s allies to secure the transition to democracy, consolidate the rule of law, and crack down on systemic corruption. By the time of the uprising, older NGOs were well established in their respective fields of expertise. They were more capable of stepping up their activities during the window of opportunity for the reform, compared to younger NGOs or non-institutional actors. Likewise, in Georgia, there were several hundred NGOs active across the country prior to the Rose Revolution, and two of them - the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA) and the Liberty Institute - played a crucial role in monitoring authorities in areas of human rights and corruption even before the uprising. These organizations forged alliances with the political opposition, played a pivotal role in mobilizing popular uprisings, and participated in reform agenda-setting immediately afterward (Broers 2005; Wheatley 2005). In Belarus, the analysis similarly indicates that the relatively open civic space between 2015-2020, and increased horizontal societal links it produced, created an infrastructure for mobilization that was able

to be activated effectively in during the popular uprising. During this relative openness, the EU actively supported civil society organisations inside Belarus.

The episode of feminist activism in Tunisia is particularly revealing of the link between capital and success in achieving small-scale democratic gain. Prior to the 2011 revolution, while Tunisian civil society was generally weak due to mass repression and the tightly closed civic space, feminist organizations working alongside precarious human rights groups had been able to make inroads in the field of bottom-up contestation and resistance. These years of work endowed these feminist organizations with a preexisting constituent base and ties to other social movement groups, as well as a degree of professional knowledge on the workings of power and key members of both the regime and the opposition. In the moment of the revolution and its aftermath, these feminist groups were not only able to mobilize immediately, thereby consolidating their popular legitimacy as revolutionary actors, but were also able to inscribe their decades-long struggle for women's equal citizenship and rights in the post-uprising democratic transition. As such, they were able to benefit from processes of co-mobilization with other social movement actors, and were able to effectively position themselves as key interlocutors with the transitional political bodies as well as representatives of the Tunisian society. The importance of this capital is particularly evident in the case of the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women (*l'Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates*, better known under its acronym ATFD). While the ATFD had been repressed under the pre-revolution Ben Ali regime, it took on a greatly increased weight in the transitional period after 2011. Endowed with access to the parliament and a good degree of expertise, the organization was able to position itself as an ally to the democratizing state after the popular uprising and effectively impose its vision not only with authorities but also within the post-2011 burgeoning field of feminist civil society. As Hudáková (2019) finds, pre-existing civil society actors were able to "transform into essential political actors that helped to drive and steer the democratization process in the country…not only because they enjoyed substantial symbolic capital for acting as rare voices of opposition to the Ben Ali regime and as prominent actors during the revolution, but also because they had the necessary level of organisation, prior networks, experience in dealing with state authorities, and expertise to engage with the transitional issues at hand."

Formal Bridges

While capital among bottom-up actors was revealed to be a factor in achieving small-scale democratic gains, it was able to be leveraged effectively when access to political authorities for the purpose of influence, negotiation, and/or advocacy was formalized. This includes official consultative roles or processes, dedicated spaces of negotiation, or collaborative frameworks for policymaking. Such links, which we call *formal bridges*, provided a dedicated and accepted spaces for bottom-up actors to not only access and but expressly influence

transitional authorities. Crucially, it is not just that the formal bridges existed but indeed that bottom-up actors were viewed as legitimate actors and accorded vectors to advise authorities in the reforms, policies, and/or institutions to be adopted as part of transitional politics.

In Tunisia, such formal bridges for bottom-up actors to influence decision-makers were built into the constitution-drafting process: civil society actors were invited to consultations with members of the National Constituent Assembly, and were able to organize conference and seminars as part of a lobbying process for their key issues. In addition, bottom-up actors were able to put forth expert advice to help guide the constitution-drafting process. In the episode regarding transitional justice, for example, bottom-up actors – organized in a coalition – were able to significantly influence the legislative period of 2011-2013 and in particular the establishment of the Truth Commission and the passing of the Law 52. This included not only regular meetings with policymakers about laws to be drafted and, more broadly, how to think about inclusive transitional justice, but also national consultations driven by victims associations to reflect the bottom-up perspective. In addition, the technical committee that was installed to design the transitional justice legislative and institutional framework was composed of 12 members, of whom half stemmed from civil society. And while these formal bridges were not perfect – the participatory mechanisms have been classified as characterized by "exclusive and uneven...particularly at the grassroots level" (Yahya 2014) - they nonetheless providing a distinct pathway for some bottom-up actors to achieve small-scale democratic gains.

Similarly, in Armenia and Georgia, civil society actors were able to assume a significant consultative role in the transitional government, resulting in many bottom-up actors becoming incorporated into political institutions or entering government positions (Freedom House, 2019). In Georgia, for example, civil society actors were actively involved in the reform agenda from the beginning. In this sense, the Rose Revolution acted as a large-scale reconfiguration that allowed civil society to upload its policy proposals to the new authorities' agenda, with many representatives of civil society joining the new government and bringing their visions and ideas with them. However, as the episode from Lebanon vividly demonstrates, formal bridges must be accompanied by other mechanisms to allow bottom-up actors to have success in achieving small-scale democratic gains.

Technical Alignment

Across the episodes, the analysis reveals that a critical mechanism underlying the success of bottom-up actors in achieving small-scale democratic gains is alignment with decision-makers in the technical dimensions of the democratic choice points. In other words, bottom-up actors are able to obtain successful outcomes in their claim-making when there is alignment with top-down actors with regards to the specificities of the policy, legislation, and/or institutional

design to be adopted. Importantly, this technical alignment is not necessarily *a priori* but rather can be provoked via the process of strategic interaction between the bottom-up and top-down levels as they interact both in institutional settings (i.e. via the formal bridges) or extra-institutional settings of contentious politics.

In North Macedonia, for instance, the issuing of the so-called Priebe Report on the systemic weaknesses related to rule of law and the recommendations to adopted, was critical in provoking this technical alignment. The report, commissioned by the European Commission and prepared by a group of senior experts led by Reinhard Priebe, was based on previous Commission reports, Venice Commission recommendations, as well as several dozen meetings with relevant stakeholders at all levels and sectors, including civil society organizations. The report subsequently served as the intellectual basis for all the protest movements to formulate their requests and indicated a bottom-up and top-down convergence of the ideas on what needs to be done. Likewise, in Serbia in the episode regarding the status of ethnic Albanians in the Preševo Valley, technical alignment between Serbian political authorities and bottom-up actors representing the Albanian community still under Serbia's jurisdiction was critical to achieving democratic gain. In particular, external mediation provided the space for alignment on the set the crisis resolution parameters that allowed the new democratic government to claim a valuable political victory by regaining full sovereignty over a stretch of land immediately around the border of Kosovo in exchange for agreement on political reforms that strengthened the status of the Albanian community. This technical alignment was also provoked through the provision of very specific policy proposals and draft laws by bottom-up actors in Georgia and Tunisia. In Georgia, for example, civil society supplied the opposition with policy ideas on a range of issues, including anti-corruption measures, that subsequently shaped their own reform agenda when the uprising saw their political empowerment. To this last point, the episodes under investigation here indicate that successful outcomes in post-uprising contentious politics are also in part linked to the constellation of actors in power or holding decision-making authority in post-uprising transitional periods.

Constellation of Power

In many of the post-uprising contexts under investigation here, political authority after the moment of mass mobilization saw the political exclusion or, in the least, marginalization of previous holders of power and the enfranchisement of oppositional actors into decision-making roles. This post-uprising configuration of political elites, what we call here the *constellation of power*, takes different forms, including a broad range of oppositional forces with diverging and even mutually incompatible ideological positions holding transitional authority (such as in Tunisia, where the Troika of the constituent assembly consisted of a fragile coalition between the Islamists and the secular left) or the rise of a big-tent coalition not marked by ideological polarization (such as in Armenia and Pashinyan's "My Step" alliance

which won 70% of the votes in the post-uprising election). What the comparative analysis reveals is that different constellations of power create different possibilities for bottom-up actors to access elites and influence democratic choice points. Crucially, though, their success depends not just on technical alignment but also how their demands shape the strategic calculations of political elites within the particular constellation of power they are navigating in the period of structural indeterminacy. In Serbia, for example, the success of bottom-up actors in the achieving recognition and increased rights for Albanian community was in part a strategic calculation on the part of moderate elites who saw the deal as a means of sidelining former regime loyalists who largely dominated the security services and securing a political victory that would reinforce their legitimacy. Likewise, in Tunisia, the research has revealed that the success of feminist mobilization in seeing the "complementarity clause" be dropped in the 2014 constitution in favour of women's equality was in part a strategic calculation on the part of Ennahda party head Rached Ghannouchi, who saw this concession as a means of strengthening his electoral base and reinforcing his ability to negotiate with the secular left a parliamentary democracy, which would be strategically advantages to the Islamist party.

The cases of Lebanon and Algeria, where the constellation of power post-uprising did not see the political enfranchisement of the opposition but rather a reconstitution or indeed replication of traditional power holders, is also instructive. In Lebanon, the blockage in the episode regarding the reform of the judiciary, despite the existence of a formal bridge linking bottom-up actors to decision-makers and a degree of technical alignment, can be largely attributed to the constellation of power that went unchanged from before the popular uprising. In the wake of cascading crises – the 2019 mass protests, the financial collapse, the port of Beirut explosion – key international stakeholders (the EU, the UN, and the World Bank) established the Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction (3RF) framework, defined as an inclusive platform to respond to Lebanon's national reform challenges and designed as a partnership between the Government of Lebanon, civil society, and the international community. Included as one of the 16 areas of work of the 3RF, the independence of the judiciary saw important draft law proposals put forth by civil society alongside commitment on the part of international partners to prioritize judicial reform, including further enhancement of independence and impartiality. In December 2021, the Administration and Justice Parliamentary Committee adopted an amended version of civil society's draft law and, following back-and-forth exchanges, approved a new version on the independence of judicial courts in March 2023. However, the law did not meet the demands of civil society or comply with international standards, and has remained stuck in review by a sub-committee (Maharat Foundation 2023). And while nine MPs endorsed the draft laws, the majority did not support the reform, as their political parties who would be negatively impacted. The failure to adopt the law despite this momentum can be attributed to the constellation of power and the lack of change to the political system, whereby the crystallized power sharing agreement rendered

parliament loath to adopt a law that would implicate them or make them lose their grip over the judiciary.

Likewise, in Algeria, the popular uprising was accompanied by a deft reconstruction of traditional power holders, whereby *le Pouvoir* (the nebulous network of military elites who control the political scene behind a seeming civilian façade along with their various business and political clients) was able to reconstitute itself through a reshuffling process. Indeed, the major institutional crisis provoked by the popular uprising was within the rank of power holders and in particular the rivalries between then-sitting president Bouteflika and his cronies, who had long been empowered, and other factions within *le Pouvoir* who were more interested in regime reconstitution than saving the figurehead at the top. This success of the protestors in the episode under consideration here, in which popular mobilization was able to cancel the scheduled presidential elections as part of a broader demand for systemic political change, can be understood as only a temporary democratic gain, in which behind-the-scenes power holders sought various means to garner popular legitimacy through the concessions and the façade of civilianization of the political system.

Quality of Coalition

The case-oriented comparative analysis across the episodes under investigation here also indicates that the success of bottom-up actors in achieving small-scale democratic gains is in part the result of the coalitions in which they mobilize. These coalitions can be delineated along two axes: the breadth and/or depth of the coalition; and the degree of ideological and/or operational cohesiveness of the coalition, what together we term here the *quality of coalition*. With regards to the first axis, deeply vertical or deeply horizontal coalitions proved effective in helping bottom-up actors achieve their demands. Deeply vertical coalitions comprise those that extend from the grassroots, informal level to the professionalized civil society level to the international NGO/donor level. Such coalitions were able to garner popular support and a build a broad base of constituents, were able to take advantage of the specific skill-set of professionalized civil society, and were able to utilize external partners as points of expertise and leverage. Deeply horizontal coalitions represent those that extend across society, crossing different sectors and groups and thus not limited to civil society groups working on the same specific issue, that are able to co-mobilize and co-advocate for their causes. Further, quality of coalition is marked by a high degree of cohesiveness within the coalition's ideological position and/or operational mode of functioning, which provides the ability to sustain activity and the mounting of bottom-up pressure beyond one-off mobilization events.

For example, in the struggle for transitional justice among bottom-up actors in Tunisia, the coalition assembled grassroots networks of victims of the previous regime's abuses and

violence, pre-existing civil society organizations dedicated to human rights, and international organizations such as the Interactional Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) and UNDP, with each member of the coalition playing a specific role. The grassroots groups were responsible for building support among the population around the idea that a legal framework would act as a mechanism for achieving justice; the professional civil society groups were responsible for submitting the draft law, participating in the consultative processes with the constituent assembly, and acting as the relay between victims and decision-makers; and the external stakeholders were responsible for providing technical experts and lessons learned from international experience to shape how the demands of society could be translated into laws and legal processes. The depth of this coalition was instrumental in allowing for broad consensus around a specific set of demands for transitional justice to be achieved and successfully conveyed to decision-makers. In addition, the coalition was endowed with a full-time paid coordinator, who played a key role in convening coalition members for strategic meetings and providing the forum for collective decision-making, thereby allowing the coalition to establish consensus and act quickly.

Likewise, in Belarus, the 2020 electoral protests, the largest-scale mobilization in Belarusian history, were in part possible thank to the breadth of the horizontal links that were established within civil society in the five years preceding the popular uprising. This breadth allowed for protests to take place across the country from May 2020 until the spring of 2021, when large-scale repressions brought an end to open and public resistance and protest. Perhaps just as importantly, and with regards to the second axis, this coalition was also endowed with a degree of ideological cohesiveness, uniting behind one candidate, Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya, supported by Maria Kalesnikava and Veronika Tsepkala. In creating this broad and cohesive coalition, the opposition was able to overcome divisions, as a divided opposition would directly play into the hands of the incumbent Lukashenka regime.

On the other hand, the cases of Georgia, North Macedonia, and Serbia demonstrate how lack of quality of coalition created blockages for bottom-up actors to secure small-scale democratic gains. In Georgia, for example, in the episode regarding judicial reform and the push for the introduction of a jury system, the coalition of bottom-up actors were marred by significant opposition, where former NGO allies like the Liberty Institute and Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), representing two groups of civil society (and two different sets of foreign backers), held differing views. The division inside the coalition, capturing two different legal philosophies, competed in the drafting process of the Criminal Procedure Code. As Helly (2006:96) argues, these division lines had not been debated in the parliament and could hardly be reconciled by the Ministry of Justice's coordination. As a result, the authorities opted for a more gradual reform, diverging from their original promises, in large part reflecting the lack of consensus among civil society. Similarly, in the case of Serbia, in both episodes of blockage

investigated here, the lack of quality of coalition was a major reason that bottom-up actors were not able to successfully see their claims translated into democratic gains. In the case of LGBTQ+ activism, the mobilization around the 2001 Pride march was organized by a small and unpopular minority that did not have the breadth of coalition necessary to force the issue on the agenda or even constitute itself as a movement. Indeed, in the end, only Labris, a lesbian/feminist NGO, carried out the march. While the event did contribute to reconfigurations of alliances, strategies, and discourses among LGBGQ+ activists themselves, with the images of violence from the Pride allowing the organizers to also gain new allies from other civil organizations and external actors such as the EU, this foundational event contributed to fostering a distinct identity for the LGBTQ+ community, setting it apart from anti-war, pacifist movements, and feminist collectives in Serbia that the LGBTQ+ movement was previously tightly associated with. It also pushed the movement to go on operating very discretely for several years. Likewise, in the case of Serbian workers' mobilization, the lack of success in achieving demands can in part be attributed to the lack of operational cohesiveness as well as an absence of breadth or depth in the coalition. With the economy in bad shape, and most workers employed in loss-making companies or furloughed, strikes were not a particularly effective strategy. Trade unions had to resort to public protests and marches, but workers – preoccupied with individualized daily survival strategies – were not available for prolonged protest mobilization. Likewise, competition within the fragmented trade union associations, especially those between the legacy trade union and its challengers, further weakened the power of the workers' movement despite a couple of flashpoints in which it could mobilize impressive numbers. Instead of accepting trade unions as genuine social partners, the government found it relatively easy to deal with workers' grievances and demands on case-by-case basis, at the level of singular companies, or in some cases to ignore worker's demands all together. Finally, national umbrella trade union organizations too could be pacified by mostly perfunctory forms of recognition and inclusion such as establishment of tripartite dialogue but without granting it any meaningful policy competences. This last example points to the final mechanism identified that underlies the success of bottom-up actors in achieving democratic gains in post-uprising contexts, and namely their degree of autonomy from political parties and elites.

Civil Society Autonomy

The final mechanism underlying the episodes of democratic gain made by bottom-up actors in post-uprising contexts concerns the degree to which they maintain a degree of separation from political parties and elites, or what we term here *civil society autonomy*. As the research has revealed, the ability of bottom-up actors to continue putting pressure on decision-makers and undertaking advocacy activities, and the ability to legitimately observe and critique the actions and lacuna with regards to democratic claims, is in part dependent on the operational distance they maintain from those in power. Here, comparing the cases of Armenia and

Georgia are useful in identifying how the operational positionality of bottom-up actors with regards to post-uprising authorities changes the ability to carry out claim-making activities. In Armenia, pro-democratic civil society actors embraced the Velvet Revolution and supported Pashinyan's democratic reform agenda. The movement's victory allowed civil society to assume a significant consultative role in the transitional government, resulting in many civil society members entering government positions (Freedom House, 2019); nonetheless, a portion of Armenian civil society maintained some distance from the government and thus was able to continue its watchdog function (Stefes and Paturyan 2021). In Georgia, however, while the alliance of civil society and the political opposition, empowered after the popular uprising, was crucial for mobilizing popular support and promoting specific reforms, there was significant "brain drain" from civil society to the political elite. With many high-level officials in the new government stemming from civil society, there was a weakening of the sector generally and the ability of the remaining civil society actors to act as a check on the transitional pathway being proposed by the new government.

Likewise, in the case of Tunisia's Union of Unemployed Graduates (UdC), the blockage experienced by the group in their pursuit of worker's rights was largely attributable to their lack of operational autonomy. The organization, which pre-dated the 2011 revolution was endowed with a high degree of capital in the form of deep networks across the country, with over 300 local antennas, and a strong constituent base; was embedded in a broad coalition of revolutionary civil society forces that crossed sectors and benefitted from co-mobilization around different issues; and was initially viewed as a legitimate actor that was able to participate in consultative processes with authorities via the formal bridges that were erected as part of the transitional process (Weipert-Fenner 2020). And while the constellation of power provided direct access points to decision-makers for the UdC, the organization was also largely managed by the communist political party (*Parti des travailleurs*) that held only marginal power in the National Constituent Assembly. The party's heavy hand on the actions and strategic decisions were the primary cause of the organization's lack of success in achieving small-scale democratic gains as well as its delegitimization among its constituents as well as other coalition partners. The UdC leadership was particularly concerned with maintaining operational links to the political party, causing a wave of defections among rank-and-file members. In addition, the organization was not able to call for mobilization on its own, as the party was interested in maintaining paternalistic control over the group. As such, the UdC was pushed to move away from mobilization for the sake of its broader set of demands regarding workers rights and instead to focus on obtaining a limited number of public sector jobs via a structured negotiation process with the party and its role within the constituent assembly. As a result, the demands of the organization were reduced from broad socio-economic change to finding jobs for members close to the party, which served not only

to neutralize the organization but undermine its legitimacy in the eyes of members who saw the UdC leadership as solely interested in their own personal gains.

6. Identifying Effective EUDP for Bottom-Up Actors

The nine countries considered in this study have been recipients of a diverse range of EU democracy promotion approaches, tools, and mechanisms. This diversity is a reflection of the differing domestic priorities and degrees of receptiveness of the political authorities in the receiving countries, the nature of the relationship and priorities of the EU in each dyad (which may include economic, security, energy, or other priorities that often compromise EU democratization efforts), and the possibilities for EU accension of each country, which largely changes the weight of EUDP's "sticks and carrots" and the strategic calculations of each party. Nonetheless, in the aftermath of the popular uprisings considered here, the EU generally saw these as windows of opportunity for democratization and in all cases attempted to react accordingly – albeit only after the contingent and ambiguous moment of mass mobilization had passed. The strategic actions and forms of EUDP put into place, though, ranged from declaratory support (Belarus) mixed with a cautious wait-and-see attitude (Lebanon and Algeria) to enhanced partnership agreements with increased tools for developing democratic institutions and infrastructure (Armenia, Serbia, and Georgia) to a broad ranging accompanying role, combined with extensive financial support, to the transition process (Tunisia and North Macedonia). For example, in Georgia, the EU responded quickly to the uprising of 2003 by expanding the European Neighborhood Policy to include the South Caucasus and pledging financial and technical support to the new Georgian authorities through initiatives like EUJUST Themis (Lebanidze 2020; Simão 2018). This was a remarkable achievement given the low level of engagement between the EU and Georgia at that time. Directing most of the assistance toward the authorities, given that the transition-period government was open to cooperation, the EU sought to capitalize on this momentum.

Regardless of the degree of reactivity of the EU to the opportunities for democratization presented by popular uprising, EUDP in post-uprising contexts was largely directed at political elites, transitional authorities, and formal political institutions, and to a somewhat lesser degree to professionalized civil society organizations – with the level of grassroots actors being notably ignored. These two sets of actors in the post-uprising period of structural indeterminacy – the formally organized political players and civil society groups – benefited from EUDP in the form of funding, capacity building/training, expert intervention, and/or dialogue processes, among others. Understanding the effectiveness of EUDP in episodes of bottom-up contentious politics thus requires taking these two layers of intervention into consideration at the same time and unpacking how they work in concert, while also assessing

how the lack of EUDP directed towards grassroots groups and fluid social movements impacted the ability of bottom-up actors to achieve their claims.

It should be noted that, in all episodes investigated here, only one demonstrates direct EU pressure placed on decision-makers in favour of the claims being made by bottom-up actors. More precisely, in the case of North Macedonia, both in 2015 and in 2016 episodes considered here, bottom-up actors used protests as a pressure point in the negotiations but also as leverage to make a case that citizens are on the side of the opposition at the time and ask for support from the EU and international community. Yet, while in the 2015 protests (when civil society asked to be included in the crisis resolution process) the EU (and US) did not openly adopt a stance but instead encouraged the resolution of the political crisis through dialogue, in 2016 (for the withdrawing of the presidential pardon for corruption and wrongdoing) their position was clear and unequivocal, targeting the pressure directly against the President and his decision. The EU and US exerted strong pressure on President Ivanov to withdraw the pardon, because they also had high stakes and interest to safeguard the Special Prosecutor (SPO), an institution that they helped to create and firmly supported, including through resources – funding and technical assistance. The protests played an important role as well in giving arguments to the opposition and the EU, demonstrating the strategic contingency between EUDP and bottom-up actors. In all other episodes, however, the role of EUDP in supporting or blocking bottom-up actors in achieving their claims was more indirect. Assessing effective EUDP thus involves assessing the EU's various tools, forms of support, and interventions interacted with the mechanisms underlying the success or indeed blockage of bottom-up actors in their struggle for democratic gains. In other words, identifying effective EUDP requires us to look at how EU intervention helped produce favourable- or indeed unfavourable - configurations for bottom-up actors in their struggle over democratic choice points.

One critical way in which the EU provided indirect support to bottom-up actors in the struggle for democratic gains post-uprising was with regards to capital. In numerous episodes studied here (Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Tunisia, North Macedonia, as well as other cases from Serbia not investigated here), the capital of civil society actors that proved so instrumental in their ability to effectively assert themselves in the fluid post-uprising context was in part the result of EU support to civil society organizations and projects that predated the moment of mass mobilization. Indeed, the EU's long-term investment in key civil society players, despite the lack of credible democratic horizon, was critical in investing in the capital of civil society actors that could then be activated in the transitional period. In this way, while the EU was only able to react after the fact to the democratic potential of the popular uprisings or revolutionary moment, its investment in civil society demonstrates a certain capacity for EUDP to anticipate

democratic openings and allow pro-democratic actors to act with agility in the crucial moments of fluidity and the new configurations they provoke.
In a similar vein, another critical way that EUDP indirectly contributed to the capacity of bottom-up actors to achieve small-scale democratic gains was through support to organizational structures, which improved the quality of coalition as well as the degree of civil society autonomy. More precisely, EU funding to core positions within the organizations of bottom-up actors, or core support more broadly, was critical in allowing for sustained engagement and coalition-building. In the Tunisia episode for transitional justice, for example, the EU contributed to core support of Avocats Sans Frontières, that allowed for a full-time dedicated coalition coordinator to be hired with the explicit purpose of carrying out the core functions of assembly, advocacy, and alliance-building that proved vital to the success of the maintenance and unity of the otherwise vertically dispersed coalition.

In addition, EUDP in post-uprising contexts proved essential in creating the formal bridges that would allow bottom-up actors to access and influence decision-makers. This included organizing convenings or indeed creating formal spaces for inclusive transitional processes, such as in Armenia where the EU brought together civil society actors and government actors to sit at the same table, resulting in more efficient advocacy. However, as the episode in Lebanon and the 3RF demonstrates, simply creating these formal bridges is not enough. Hand-in-hand, a key dimension of effective EUDP in facilitating not just exchanges between bottom-up actors and decision-makers but also convergence over democratic struggles is in the provision of expertise, training, and capacity-building around issues to *both* bottom-up and top-down actors, thereby allowing for technical alignment. Here, the case of Tunisia and the episode of feminist mobilization to eradicate the constitutional article on women's complementarity in favour of full equality is revealing. The EU provided capacity-building and convened spaces of negotiation not just between the two levels of actors but also within each level itself: the EU provided technical training to female politicians and party members from across the ideological divide to arrive at policy consensus on the issue of women's rights, allowing for these representatives to then carryout key advocacy work within their own parties and political families. Likewise, the EU held debates about women's equality and violence against women that allowed for convergence of position. These various interventions produced technical alignment between numerous elites holding decision-making authority and the feminist organizations around the issue of parity and the suppression of complementarity, which allowed for negotiated agreement in response to bottom-up pressure.

However, the simultaneous interventions of EUDP at two levels of actor do not imply an equality between them; on the contrary, in the cases under investigation here, the EU almost always deferred to the position of authorities and the course of reform that they set rather

than that of bottom-up actors. In Armenia, the EU viewed the 2018 political transition as an opportunity to support various reforms, particularly in the areas of rule of law and justice (Khvorostiankina, 2023) and provided support to both the authorities and civil society alongside a roadmap that included policy dialogue, technical and financial support to prioritize the participation of civil society in domestic policymaking. Yet in practice, when targeting policy changes, the EU proved more inclined to cooperate with the authorities while viewing civil society as an important but secondary actor. In the episode of judicial reform and the bottom-up demand for the vetting of judges, the government's decision to roll-back the issue and implement instead an incremental, gradual reform did not face push back on the part of the EU, despite the continued efforts of civil society to advocate for more substantial and integrated reforms. Likewise, in Georgia, the EU offered unconditional support to the new government, often disregarding warnings from other actors, including civil society. Indeed, in following the lead of authorities, the EU approach inadvertently contributed to the further weakening of civil society and its ability to push for small-scale democratic gains. Similarly, in Serbia, the workers' mobilization for more inclusive processes of designing economic reforms was seen by the government as a threat to its ability to carry out necessary but socially painful reforms – a position ultimately supported by the EU and its democracy promotion approach based in liberal market reforms. Indeed, the EU's macro-level role as an arbiter of the country's commitment to economic reform helped enforce broad political and discursive opportunity structures that were averse to the prospects of genuine social partnership between the Serbian government and trade unions.

This bias to default towards the policy and reform pace and preferences of decision-makers in post-uprising contexts reveals a broader factor that undermines the effectiveness of EUDP in supporting the efforts of bottom-up actors to achieve democratic gains: the dependency on political will and the inability to shift tides. The EU's diverse democracy promotion tools and approaches are helpful in securing democratic gains when interacting with very specific reforms or smaller policy changes that benefit from at least some degree top-down political will; conversely, they are less able to change the heading set by authorities or indeed promote a larger democratic transition. The example of Lebanon's 3RF process and efforts at reform of the judiciary is a case in point. The framework for reform was in place, with special working group led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in partnership with the European Union to act as a platform for comprehensive policy discussions and dialogue, bringing together stakeholders from the Lebanese authorities, civil society organizations, international organizations, donors, and parliamentary committees. Yet in the absence of political will on the part of authorities, EUDP proved unable, or indeed unwilling, to shift the dynamic. The EU did not use its existing leverage, and while the 3RF provided a good platform for coordination the results were ineffectual. Indeed, the feeling among bottom-up actors is that the EU did not follow up any their recommendations and or take their suggestions into

consideration. As one interviewee stated, “They [EU officials] sit with us, nod and praise our suggestions, then we see them sitting with the same [traditional] politicians and doing business as usual with them.”

The implication, which is clearly demonstrated in the research, is that when transition processes move in anti-democratic directions, EUDP is not only unable to shift the tides but indeed inadvertently may end up supporting anti-democratic trends. In both Armenia and Georgia, the ambitious democratic agenda in the broader context of external security threats translated to specific actions on the part of post-uprising governments that were very questionable from the democratic point of view. In both cases, the support from the EU was generous and turned a blind eye to autocratic tendencies, creating anti-democratic state actions that were at least in part supported by EUDP. Likewise, in North Macedonia, the EU’s assistance for the country in general had been mostly directed to technical aspects, such as drafting of strategies and laws, while practical implementation of the legislation remained weak. Moreover, in a young democracy still in transition, many aspects had not been regulated or fully functional, including the separation of powers or the presidential powers. There was overall very little donor support – including by the EU – for the parliament, especially for its oversight capacity or for building a political dialogue and fostering cooperation between the political parties/groups. In such a context, the parliament did not properly exercise its constitutional power and was not the highest embodiment of democracy, but merely a tool of the executive. Nonetheless, the EU’s solution to various political crises was sought through political party leader meetings, outside the laws and formal institutions, exhibiting a contradiction in the EU’s goal to help the country strengthen the institutions and improve the legal framework. Instead, it further undermined the institutions and created confusion in the existing legislation. Such an outcome displays EUDP’s limited efficiency, over the long term, to help create strong institutions.

This inability, or even unwillingness, to course correct EUDP in the face of democratic backsliding reveals a competing priority embedded in the EU’s democracy promotion approach in the aftermath of popular uprisings, and namely the primacy of stability. Popular uprisings demanding systemic political change and full-scale revolutions leading to the ouster of regimes are by definition moments of acute political crisis that are unstable, highly contingent, and unpredictable (Dobry 1983, 1986). While the EU is in fact fairly reactive in deploying a variety of tools and discourses to position itself as supporting reform and democratization within post-uprising political processes, the ultimate objective is to promote stability over democracy. The case of Algeria in the context of the Arab Spring and its own mass, anti-system protest movement in 2019, the *Hirak*, demonstrates this uneasy relationship with EUDP and the prioritizing of stability to the detriment bottom-up demands for democracy. Prior to the decade of the Arab uprisings, the EU’s approach towards Algeria

demonstrated a reluctance to use political conditionality, suggesting that security considerations overshadowed democracy promotion efforts. Concerns about domestic political stability (especially in the wake of the country's 1992-2002 civil war) alongside economic interests motivated the EU to preserve the status quo and secure its own interests instead of leading a wave of democratization, which was likely to bring political instability. As Youngs (Youngs, 2002) argues, "the European policy toward Algeria was one of the most emblematic cases of non-intervention and of the EU's disinclination to employ coercive pressure in relation to democratic shortfalls." The effect of the Arab Spring in Algeria, however, provided a new opening vis-à-vis EUDP. In this context, in December 2011, Algeria officially indicated its willingness to start exploratory negotiations regarding the elaboration of an Action Plan under the renewed ENP (Zoubir and Tran, 2023), indicating a degree of discursive convergence, as the Algerian regime's touting of a commitment to democratization and political reform corresponded with the EU's broader re-commitment to Arab democracy in the wake of the revolutionary movements and the supposed shift towards a "more for more" policy. Yet, as Hill (2019) finds, "despite the intensification of the country's ties to the European Union (EU) from one regime to the other, the willingness and ability of Brussels to put democratizing pressure on Algiers decreased rather than increased.'"

More specifically, in investigating the nature of EUDP and to whom it was directed, what is revealed is that EU interests in stability intersect with regime maintenance dynamics. In this way, EUDP becomes a support for the regime's reconstitution under the guise of democratization and reform. The response of the Algerian state to various waves of popular protest and demands for systemic change has ranged from cosmetic reforms, selective repression, the neutralization of civil society, the purchasing of social peace through aid and subsidies, and the change in figureheads at the top, all marketed as responding to protestors demands and inaugurating the "New Algeria." However, such moves have acted instead as mechanisms for the regime to reconstitute itself and re-establish popular legitimacy. Meanwhile, EUDP has been largely directed towards the state and supporting the supposed democratization pathway it has set, while the democracy promotion toolkit in Algeria has focused largely on economics and not political reform, bolstering the political economy upon which the regime rests. While EUDP provides some various forms of support to Algerian civil society actors and oppositional political parties, this is relatively small and the closing civic space and various forms of restrictions they face has been met with virtually no pushback on the part of the EU. In accepting to work with post-uprising authorities and directing EUDP to support their charted course for political reform, the EU has in fact undermined the ability of bottom-up actors to push for democratic gains and has perhaps even inadvertently contributed to their own political marginalization and repression.

The overarching finding is that EUDP is effective in assisting bottom-up actors to achieve small-scale democratic gains when such gains are seen as contributing to stabilization of the new democratic regime. The episode of Serbia's Preševo Valley is a case in point. The main impetus for EU involvement was a desire to de-escalate conflict and provide stability, but that also translated to supporting a settlement that enhanced the rights of the local Albanian population. Here, the EU mission played a fundamental role, first as an intermediary between the two sides, then in taking part in direct, face-to-face negotiations in a mediation role, and finally in helping fund and monitor some of the programs agreed in the settlement. In the broader pursuit of de-escalation, the EU was able to support bottom-up demands for further democratic gains that were seen as vital to stabilization.

7. Conclusion: Rethinking Conditionality and Accession

As shown in this research, while EUDP can lend support to the efforts of bottom-up actors in pursuing their democratic struggles, this is often only indirect and is largely dependent on how the process of democratization is viewed not only by transitional political authorities but also by the EU itself. Indeed, given that EUDP is far more adapted to and directed at a top-down approach, and given the primacy of stability among EU priorities towards its neighbourhood, democracy promotion efforts can produce unintended consequences that work at cross-purposes to democratization. When this occurs, it undermines the credibility of the EU as normative power or genuine promoter of democracy in the eyes bottom-up actors who feel themselves to be ignored, unsupported, or indeed deliberately sidelined for the purpose of realpolitik. Nowhere is this dynamic more apparent than with the issue of conditionality: the EU's reticence or even incapacity to credibly use its leverage and enforce negative consequences for non-compliance with democratic reforms or practices renders the tool of conditionality, and in particular in countries with no credible or possible pathway to membership, an empty threat. While such a dynamic is obvious in places like Algeria, where the regime is able to easily resist EU democratization pressure given the impossibility of accession, conditionality has proved its limits even in places such as North Macedonia, where the country's membership perspective is unclear or disputed.

To this point, given the track record of successful transitions to democracy within the EU's neighbourhood, is a guaranteed pathway to accession the only truly effective form of EUDP? And if so, does this mean that EUDP can only, at best, help accompany the achievement of small-scale democratic gains under the right set of configurations and, at worst, contribute to autocratic maintenance dynamics? We argue that there is perhaps a middle ground, a way to stimulate the incentives that membership – the ultimate "carrot" – offers even short of full accession. In the case of the Western Balkans, for example, considering diminutive economic size of the region, it would have been fairly cheap for the EU to allow the countries of the

region access to some economic benefits of membership sooner. This could have been done, for instance, through fast-tracking access to regional and cohesion funds. These funds dwarf in size all EUDP funds invested in the region over the last 25 years, and could have illustrated the benefits of the EU integration to regional public and politicians much sooner and more tangibly. In the specific case of Serbia, simply signing the stabilization and association agreement (SAA) sooner would have eased somewhat distributive consequences of economic reform in the country in early 2000s. In this period, Serbia experienced strong but jobless growth. Limited access to the EU internal market made Serbian industrial sector additionally unattractive for investment, which contributed to massive job losses (albeit was certainly not the sole or the main cause of job losses), which in turn contributed to weaker legitimacy of the new democratic regime. Coupled with this, what the episodes in Serbia show is that alternative EUDP scenarios that include bottom-up actors in the socioeconomic equation are perhaps necessary. The EU should not impose economic and labor reforms and condition funding on their achievement, as these can produce important grievances that destabilize the democratic transition, as the succession of strikes (first the teachers, then the auto industry, and finally a general strike) shows. Changes to political culture take time, and the EU's allyship with an unpopular reforming government instead of bottom-up actors can actually serve to delegitimize the EU and the transition process.

Likewise, in the case of Tunisia, the EU was the most important source of funding and support to the democratic transition, yet ultimately without the end goal of membership this process could not be fully stabilized. The membership possibility requires candidate states to fulfil a huge number of requirements and to really work towards a fixed goal, but in return provides the opportunity to benefit from all the advantages that come with having wealthy, highly performing, and stable neighbors. Indeed, in the case of Tunisia, the collapse of the economy and the EU's inability to provide socioeconomic stabilization, despite mass funding, is one of of the reasons for loss of support to democracy (Rennick 2023). Given this, rethinking how to provide at least some of the benefits of accession in cases where a membership pathway is either compromised or indeed impossible would strengthen how conditionality could be a key tool in democracy promotion. The Armenian CEPA (Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement) is a step in that direction, although the full potential of the tool is not fully realised yet.

Yet even beyond institutional redesign, there are other ways in which EUDP could be directed towards bottom-up actors to strengthen their own struggles for democratization, from developing new competencies within civil society to monitor and safeguard transitions to offering longer and more sustained support to ensure that small-scale gains are enshrined and implemented. Indeed, across the interviews collected here, civil society and social movement actors – even when highly dissatisfied or even disgusted with the EU for its actions/inactions

in light of autocratization and human rights abuses – still state there is a real and demonstrable value to EU democracy support. There is a broad consensus that the EU has a role to play, but that that role needs to be played better and in accordance with the EU's self-stated values and commitments. Exploring in further depth what specifically the EU could be doing to better support post-uprising transition processes and specifically the efforts of bottom-up actors to achieve democratic gains and push for change from below is a necessary venture if EUDP is to fulfil its potential.

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