Policy Brief No.2

How EU Democracy Assistance to Civil Society Can Help Secure Democratic Gains

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April 2025

Funded by the European Union under Horizon Europe Call: HORIZON-CL2-2021-DEMOCRACY-01. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Content

1 Introduction to the EMBRACE project

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

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

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

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

2 Introduction to this Policy Report

This policy report outlines when and what kind of EU support allows civil society actors to contribute to concrete and measurable democratic gains in contexts of political transition. In the face of American disengagement and Russian expansionism, the EU is currently undertaking a remarkably quick realignment of its security strategy and policy frameworks towards its eastern and southern neighborhoods. This includes the reorganization of DG NEAR and its division into separate directorates with their own specific priority areas for the management of Euro-Mediterranean and Euro-Eastern European relations. In the backdrop to these changes, there has been a growing disenchantment within the EU and its member states of external democracy support and an increasing emphasis on securing the EU's own strategic and material interests. This has resulted in what Youngs describes as the "defensive turn" in EU democracy assistance programming (Youngs 2024). In conceptual terms, this involves a contraction of the vision for democracy assistance away from pursuing systemic change, which could threaten stability or the international order. In practical terms, EU support to pro-democracy civil society actors has moved away from supporting overtly political projects to promoting issue areas such as social entrepreneurship, environmental protection, and women and youth inclusion, alongside the safeguarding of civic spaces.

Yet, EU democracy assistance to bottom-up actors is not a lost cause. In a systematic investigation of 12 episodes of small-scale democratic gains achieved by civil society and social movement actors in transitional contexts across nine countries in the European neighborhood (Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Belarus, Ukraine, Serbia, North Macedonia, Armenia, and Georgia), EU financial and technical assistance proved instrumental in providing resources vital to their success. Indeed, findings suggest that EU support to pro-democratic civil society actors can contribute to the achievement of small-scale democratic gains at two key moments: in the period before democratic opening, and when the window of opportunity for democratic transition has opened. This policy presents what forms of EU support to civil society actors contribute to demonstrable democratic gains. This report also provides two case studies of how EU democracy support facilitated the achievements made by bottom-up actors in Tunisia and Armenia. Finally, this report provides general recommendations for EU engagement with civil society actors in the southern and eastern neighborhood in the field of democracy promotion, and specific recommendations in light of the current protest movement underway in Serbia and the potential to contribute to bottom-up democratization.

3 What Limits the Effectiveness of EU Democracy Assistance to Civil Society Actors?

As part of its broader democracy assistance policy frameworks and instruments, the European Union since 1994 has targeted civil society for the promotion of democratic transition in its southern and eastern neighborhood. Enshrined in the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), this program is designed to complement geographical programs such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) by focusing not on the level of the State and institution-building processes but rather at the level of bottom-up actors and their own efforts to promote democratic reforms and the protection of rights. In this spirit, the EIDHR was designed to work around the politics of conditionality and lines imposed in formal government-level cooperation with the EU, and was

conceived as a means of contributing to democratization even in the face of resistance on the part of regimes. In 2013, the EU added to its bottom-up democracy promotion toolkit with the establishment of the European Endowment of Democracy (EED). Designed in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings and the EU's acknowledgment of its limited ability to engage positively in revolutionary and transitional contexts (Youngs 2014), the EED was conceived as a rapid response mechanism that could quickly deploy assistance to smaller and less organizationally structured civil society groups (Datsiv 2024). And as an autonomous grant-making body, it was also designed to provide the EU with plausible deniability in the challenging of authoritarian regimes (Youngs 2024).

Yet, in evaluations (Gómez Isa et al. 2016; Babayan and Viviani 2013) and academic studies (Gómez Isa, Churruca Muguruza, and Wouters 2018; Giusti and Fassi 2014; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011) of the impact of these programs in terms of promoting and consolidating democracy in the southern and eastern neighborhood, findings reveal a consistently limited degree of impact. At best, studies find that EU democracy support via bottom-up actors can help produce conditions amenable to democratization, producing an indirect and piecemeal effect on political reform processes or helping build a "demand" for democracy from below (Chenoweth and Stephan 2021). This finding, moreover, is not unique to the EU nor the countries in its neighborhood: studies conducted on other contexts around the globe confirm only a very limited degree of impact of external support to CSOs and bottom-up democratization trends in producing democratic reform and institutions (Zeeuw 2014).

While part of the reason for this lack of demonstrable progress in promoting democratization through bottom-up support lies in problems of measurement, it also reflects implementation gaps. In budgetary terms, EIDHR, despite its global purview, represented only 1.8 percent of the European Commission's total aid budget as of 2019 (Godfrey and Youngs 2019). Likewise, while EED's annual budget has increased steadily since its establishment, it nonetheless remains only a small percentage of the total budget dedicated to development and humanitarian aid. This constricted funding environment indicates that the EU approach to democracy assistance remains heavily oriented towards top-down vectors. Moreover, while these instruments are designed to be implemented without the necessity of government consent, the manner in which civil society sectors are governed in many parts of the southern and eastern neighborhoods has meant that the most politically sensitive projects or the most oppositional civil society actors are simply unable to receive support. Authoritarian governments are able to use legal frameworks regulating civil society to shutter organizations or have some form of direct operational or financial oversight, ensuring that the civil society sector acts within strict margins of maneuver. For example, Georgia's recent Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, requiring civil society organizations to disclose sources of funding and activities, provides a mechanism for the government to monitor and restrict CSO activity. Under such conditions, civil society organizations that are most apt to benefit from EU democracy assistance are those that are regime-friendly and that carry out projects that do not threaten the political status quo (Dominguez de Olazabal 2020). This tendency to finance politically safe projects also reflects the priorities of the European Union and its well-established preference for stability and security over change, particularly in the southern Mediterranean (Achrainer and Pace 2025; Dandashly 2020).

Just as importantly, the method of deployment of bottom-up democracy assistance, based on a logic of external project implementation (Huber 2008), has translated to a short-term and ad-hoc approach. For bottom-up actors, the promotion of democracy must be packaged as one-off projects,

to be achieved within a limited time frame, and with specific activities leading to easily measurable results. In turn, civil society actors that are able to excel within this project-based mindset of democracy promotion – those who can respond to bids successfully and manage administratively burdensome EU reporting requirements – are often those that most western-oriented and professionalized but not necessarily representative of their societies or broad social movements (Stephan, Lakhani, and Naviwala 2015). Likewise, projects must be designed to meet easily achievable indicators of success rather than promote more profound transformative processes whose impact may be longer-term and less easily observable. And in contexts where survival of the NGO sector is already precarious and reliant on donor funding, civil society's priority can ultimately move towards self-preservation rather than the promotion of change. As Bush finds, this combination of factors has led to a "taming" of democracy assistance and the inability of foreign-funded bottom-up programming to confront dictatorship (Bush 2015). It has also resulted in the "NGOization" and depoliticization of many civil society organizations and their loss of popular credibility (Arda and Banerjee 2021; Jalali 2013). Indeed, there has been increasing pushback in the EU neighborhood, and particularly the southern Mediterranean, against EU-funded civil society actors and EU support, precisely because it is viewed as interventionist or neocolonial and ultimately serving the purposes of regimes and not the loftier goals of democratic change and extension of rights as purported.

4 What Works? How EU Democracy Assistance Helped Achieve Small-Scale Democratic Gains by Bottom-Up Actors

Yet, the picture in not entirely bleak. In a systematic investigation of 12 episodes of small-scale democratic gains achieved by civil society actors in the EU neighbourhood, the EMBRACE research team was able identify the role that EU democracy assistance in the form of funding, capacity building/training, expert intervention, and/or dialogue processes played in helping secure these gains.

The research involved semi-structured interviews with civil society actors, EU officials, and political authorities, along with document reviews, policy analyses, and desk research. The following episodes were investigated:

Country	Episode	Short Description
Serbia	2001 Status of Ethnic Albanians in the Preševo Valley.	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.
North Macedonia	2016 Demand for Withdraw of Presidential Pardon.	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	Feminist Mobilization and Changes to the 2014 Constitution.	Feminist networks and groups were able 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.

	2011-2013 Transitional Justice Mobilization.	Tunisian bottom-up forces successfully advocated for transitional justice and have a significant degree of influence in the draft law and institutional framework for the Truth and Dignity Commission. However, key issues related to torture, abuses, and regional deprivation were left out.
Algeria	Protest to Block the Electoral Process of July 2019.	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 sham elections.
Lebanon	2019 Save the Bisri Valley Campaign.	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.
Ukraine	Launching of the National Anticorruption Buro of Ukraine (NABU) 2014.	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.
	Mobilization around Judicial Reform.	Increasing the independence, transparency, and fairness of the Ukrainian judiciary has long been a topic of negotiations between the EU and Ukraine. Some formal gains were made along the advice of the EU and local civil society experts, although the Ukrainian government, parliament, and judiciary itself failed to reach meaningful changes in the system.
Belarus	Formation of the Coordination Council 2020.	After the 2020 elections, the Coordination Council was formed to dispute the outcome of the elections and manage a transition into democracy. The Council brought together various sectors of society, uniting the opposition and emerging nodes of revolution.
	Institutionalization and further democratisation of the democratic forces in exile.	From exile, the Belarusian democratic forces engage in ongoing institutionalization and democratization of political structures which attempt to provide an alternative to the regime in Belarus. Furthermore, they engage in building institutional links with entities such as the EU.
Georgia	Anti-Corruption Mobilization 2001.	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 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.
Armenia	Anti-Corruption Mobilization 2018-2022.	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.

EU democracy assistance was found to facilitate these democratic gains made by civil society actors in four concrete ways:

Building the political capital of civil society actors to push for democratization from below

Across the episodes, a consistent trend is that social movement and civil society actors that existed prior to the moment of democratic opening or political transition in their countries proved those most able to successfully establish themselves as key interlocutors with authorities. The analysis demonstrates that these bottom-up actors were able to nimbly leverage their existing skillset and diverse resources to seize the opportunity for democratization when it came. They had networks that could be quickly mobilized, had already undertaken the long process of building constituents, 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 authorities in a continuous manner, were viewed with a good degree of legitimacy by both average citizens and authorities, and had an established degree of professional competency.

In numerous of these episodes (Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Tunisia, and North Macedonia), this political capital of civil society actors was acquired in part through the organizational support provided by the EU. Indeed, the EU's long-term investment in key civil society players, even before the moment of democratic opening, was critical in allowing them to acquire experience and build their political capital. In this way, EU democracy assistance helped these bottom-up actors anticipate the moment of democratic opening by building their resources and skillsets that allowed them to act with agility in the crucial moments of when democratic gains could be achieved.

Establishing formal bridges between bottom-up actors and decisions-makers

Civil society actors in the episodes under investigation were able to achieve small-scale democratic gains when access to political authorities was formalized. This includes official consultative roles or processes, dedicated spaces of negotiation, or collaborative frameworks for policymaking. Such formal bridges provided a dedicated and accepted spaces for bottom-up actors to not only access and but expressly influence the decision-making of authorities, thereby providing them with a credible pathway for securing democratic gains.

As a third-party actor, the EU and its various forms of democracy support proved essential in creating these 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 decision-making 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, or in Tunisia where the EU organized multi-stakeholder convenings to discuss the priorities of the democratic transition.

Facilitating technical alignment of bottom-up and top-down actors on democratic reforms

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 reforms to be adopted. In other words, civil society actors were able to achieve democratic gains when there was 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 through interactions and exchanges.

In numerous cases investigated here, EU democracy assistance through the provision of expertise, training, and capacity-building was critical in producing this technical alignment. For example, in the case of Ukraine's judicial reform, the EU provided technical expertise on judicial reforms based on previous experiences to both civil society actors, who were viewed as an important ally, and to political elites, in particular through the Pravo Justice project. This included technical assistance in developing the strategy and action plan, which were synchronised with European methodologies. While full judicial reform was not achieved, the changes that were introduced in the period 2014-2018, and in particular the adoption of new legislation, demonstrated the successful capacity of civil society actors to achieve a certain degree of democratic change through the alignment of suggested reforms as facilitated by EU assistance.

Providing core organizational support for coalition-building and civil society autonomy

Across the episodes under investigation, the success of bottom-up actors in achieving small-scale democratic gains is in part the result of cohesive and broad coalitions in which they mobilized. These coalitions, which is some cases were deeply vertical and in some cases were deeply horizontal, proved instrumental in helping bottom-up actors achieve their demands. Deeply vertical coalitions comprised those that extended 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 skillset of professionalized civil society, and were able to utilize external partners as points of expertise and leverage. Deeply horizontal coalitions represented those that extended across society, crossing different sectors and groups. These coalitions were able to co-mobilize and co-advocate for their causes. Likewise, civil society actors were able to successfully secure democratic gains when they maintained a degree of organizational autonomy from political elites. This operational distance from those in power proved essential for bottom-up actors to put pressure on decision-makers, undertake advocacy activities, and critique shortcomings in terms of democratization. In Armenia, for instance 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; nonetheless, a portion of Armenian civil society maintained some distance from the government and thus was able to continue its watchdog function.

In the episodes investigated here, EU support to organizational structures proved essential to improving the quality of coalitions enjoyed by civil society actors and ensuring their operational autonomy. This included EU funding to core positions, such as a full-time coalition coordinator, and core organizational support more broadly. 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.

Overall, the evidence indicates that EU democracy assistance to civil society actors in the form of financial support, the provision of technical expertise, the creation of spaces for dialogue and negotiation, and capacity-building helped bottom-up actors achieve democratic gains. To highlight

these points further, and how they interact, two case studies from Tunisia and Armenia reveal specifically how EU democracy assistance helps promote meaningful bottom-up democratization.

5 Case Study 1: EU Support to Feminist Mobilization for Women's Equality in Tunisia

As the democratic transition began to take shape in 2011, Tunisian civil society breathed new life. From grassroots movements to established NGOs, civil society actors found new opportunities to organize, mobilize, and advocate for a variety of issues. This period marked a shift towards greater political engagement and activism as people began reclaiming their agency after years of repression. Alongside this momentum, a diverse and active network of external actors began operating in full force after the revolution. The EU played a crucial role in supporting various bottom-up actors through democracy-promotion tools and mechanisms. A prominent example was the success of women's mobilization during the constitution-drafting phase of 2012-2014, where feminist organizations and activists played a key role in inscribing women's equality in the new constitution.

Women's rights were central to debates within the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), sparking intense political contestation. In August 2012, feminist groups protested the first draft of the constitution, which included the controversial "complementarity" clause (Article 28), which stated that the State "shall guarantee the protection of the rights of women and shall support the gains thereof as true partners to men in the building of the nation and as having a role complementary thereto within the family."[1]

Civil society successfully pressured decision-makers to remove the term "complementary" and revise the text to affirm gender equality. A major effort came from several feminist organizations, such as the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), which formed a coalition of 16 organizations to advocate for women's rights. The coalition became a powerful force in the fight against the complementarity clause and in promoting gender parity. As one activist recalled:

> *"When the first draft of the constitution was introduced in July 2012, we all took to the streets because they had included 'complementarity' instead of equality. We lobbied, organized protests, and worked tirelessly with women and progressives. In the end, they had no choice but to remove the concept of complementarity and include gender parity."*

The success of feminist mobilization was rooted in years of groundwork laid during the dictatorship. Despite facing restrictions under Ben Ali, organizations like ATFD and AFTURD (Tunisian Association of Women for Research and Development) strengthened their influence during the democratic transition. As one activists explained:

> *"There was a core group of feminist organizations that formed a central hub in the capital, which was a powerful force, both in terms of influence and in proposing ideas. Part of its composition allowed it not to rely on external added value. Much knowledge was already concentrated within this core."*

[1] Taken from the unofficial translation of the draft Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia, prepared on behalf of International IDEA, Tunisia.

ATFD, in particular, built a strong support base, forged ties with other social movements, and developed a deep understanding of power dynamics while maintaining connections with key figures in both the regime and the opposition. With its parliamentary access and extensive expertise, ATFD positioned itself as a key partner in the democratization process, shaping negotiations with authorities and contributing to the growing feminist civil society landscape after the revolution.

While feminist organizations had already established a strong foundation through years of activism, EU support played a crucial role in amplifying their efforts, providing them with the necessary resources and expertise to push for concrete legal and policy reforms. This was evident through international conferences, training sessions, and numerous visits by experts. These activities enriched gender debates in Tunisia by sharing comparative experiences and lessons learned from other contexts. In the case of Law 58,[2] for instance, the EU and other donors not only financed parts of the reform process but also provided expertise that guided legislative drafting and implementation. Most importantly, the financial and technical backing not only reinforced feminist civil society's advocacy efforts but also created external pressure on the state to institutionalize gender-related reforms. By integrating feminist organizations into state-led initiatives, such as those overseen by the Tunisian Ministry of Women, Family and Child Care (MFFE), EU support further legitimized their role in policymaking (Della Valle 2018).

6 Case Study 2: EU Successful Support to Anti-Corruption Efforts in Armenia

Before the 2018 Velvet Revolution, the EU engaged constructively and systematically with Armenian civil society, providing funding to some of the most prominent NGOs. This capacity building at the organizational level of bottom-up actors, itself a long process, meant that by the time of the 2018 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 democratic reform, compared to younger NGOs or non-institutional actors. One prime example was the Commitment to Constructive Dialogue, a platform launched in 2016. After the Velvet Revolution, this platform was effectively utilized to provide suggestions for the new government's Anti-Corruption strategy, serving as a key vector by which civil society was able to contribute to democratization.

Indeed, with advice from civil society, the new Armenian government embarked on creating a number of new institutions and legal acts aimed at strengthening the anti-corruption policy framework. The role of the EU in this was two-fold: (a) support the new government directly with expertise, legal and policy advice, and "moral" or symbolic support; (b) support to civil society so that it could engage with the government from a more informed and empowered position. In working with both the government and the civil society simultaneously in the provision of expertise, and then bringing both the top-down and bottom-up actors to the same table, the EU was able to foster the technical alignment and space for constructive dialogue necessary to allow bottom-up actors to achieve democratic gains. As one interviewee stated: *"The EU upgraded our and our allies' capacities."*

[2] In 2017, the Tunisian Parliament adopted Law 58, which set out measures to prevent violence against women, protect survivors, and prosecute abusers.

More generally, EU effective democracy assistance to civil society actors in Armenia came in the form of capacity-building in order to strengthen the ability of bottom-up actors to propose legislative changes. Generally, EU experts in narrow and specific fields, such as workers' rights, anti-discrimination laws, and electoral codes, shared their experience and expertise through training, consultations, or through official venues such as the Venice Commission opinions. This has taken civil society in Armenia to a new level and allowed them to make valuable, high-quality legislative proposals that are taken seriously. This gradual capacity building, which commenced prior to the moment of democratic opening, prepared civil society to step up their activities after the Velvet Revolution and efficiently use the window of opportunity.

7 Conclusion and Recommendations

Across the more than 150 interviews collected here, civil society and social movement actors from all nine EU neighbourhood countries under investigation – even when highly dissatisfied with the EU for its actions/inactions in light of autocratisation 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. A genuine partnership with civil society in the field of democracy promotion requires more than economic support, technical assistance, or networking opportunities. It requires using political influence and proactive engagement to defend the voice and position of civil society. The EU, as an agent of influence, can use its various tools and leverage at both the top-down and bottom-up levels to push for more proactive and sustained engagement with and by civil society. In so doing, the EU can more meaningfully support democratization from below.

7.1. General recommendations

First and foremost, the EU should not stop supporting civil society actors as part of its democracy assistance programming, even in the absence of a credible democratic horizon. Moments of democratic opening or systemic political change are hard to predict and can come on quite suddenly, and as the research demonstrates, supporting pro-democracy bottom-up actors *before* the window of opportunity opens places them in a strong position to concretely push for and secure democratic gains. To this point, in moments before a political transition is underway, EU democracy assistance to bottom-up actors should:

- **Provide Core Support to Civil Society Organizations:** Project-based support creates a well-known trap for non-profit organizations, who must constantly vie for more and more projects to be able to pay their staff and cover running costs. This not only can cause mission drift but can move a civil society organization into a model of professionalized Project-Cycle-Management that ultimately depoliticizes pro-democracy actors. While blanket core support to an organization might be impossible due to reasons of accountability, offering core support for key positions and higher running cost eligibility would significantly contribute to strengthening the organizational sustainability and strategic autonomy of pro-democracy bottom-up actors, thereby allowing them to build their political capital.
- **Develop and Expand Democracy Assistance Mechanisms that Diversify the Actors Receiving Support**: The creation of mechanisms such as the EED that can provide funding and other

forms of democracy assistance to different types of bottom-up actors should be increased. Local organizations are often forced to apply for grants in partnership with international NGOs, which limits their autonomy and prevents them from developing their own approaches to advocacy and reform. This dependency not only sidelines smaller, community-based groups but also reinforces a hierarchical funding structure where decision-making remains concentrated in larger, internationally connected CSOs. Shifting resources (both material and immaterial) directly to different types of local actors would allow them to create, design, and implement their own initiatives, contributing to a more inclusive and locally driven democratization process.

- **Safeguard Democratic Potential by Supporting Spaces Where It Can Exist:** The shrinkage of civic space throughout the EU neighborhood is an ongoing and deepening phenomenon, and the EU has been responding through innovative measures including the shift in grant-making to sectors considered less overtly concerned with systemic political change. While this is vital to protecting the civic space and the existence of a civil society sector, it has also supported the defanging of bottom-up political opposition and can direct EU democracy assistance to regime-friendly actors. The EU should identify the spaces where democratic activism can continue to flourish and direct various forms of assistance to those spaces. This can be best achieved through a deep consultative and co-design process with bottom-up actors to identify these spaces and what forms of support would be most beneficial. Here, local EU delegations and intermediaries such as diasporic activists and organizations have a key role to play in informing democracy assistance design.

Once a window for democratic transition has opened or a transition process is underway, EU democracy assistance to bottom-up actors should:

- **Develop New Technical Competencies within Civil Society to Contribute to Democratic Reforms:** As the research has shown, the provision of technical expertise and capacity-building with regards to legal frameworks, institutional design, or policymaking provided civil society actors with the ability to advocate concretely with specific recommendations for the achievement of democratic gains. Likewise, developing and funding research and fact-finding capacities by bottom-up actors creates a valuable base of evidence that can later be used for decision-making (by the government) and for advocacy (by the bottom-up actors). It also creates benchmarks and indexes that can be used to measure performance, to demonstrate progress or setbacks. Working with civil society actors on targeted and specific democratic reforms during the transition process[3] can build their capacity to secure democratic gains and help ensure that the types of reforms adopted reflect popular priorities. This in turn promotes democratic transitions that are substantive and not purely procedural in nature, which is critical to building popular support for democratic transition.
- **Apply Leverage to Ensure Civil Society's Inclusion in Democratic Transitions:** Hand-in-hand, the EU can meaningfully support bottom-up democratization processes by ensuring that transitional authorities incorporate civil society into the process. As the research has shown,

[3] Depending on the sensitivity of the policy issue, this could also take place before the opening of a democratic window.

the EU's diverse democracy promotion tools and approaches proved most effective when interacting with very specific reforms or smaller policy changes that benefit from at least some degree top-down political will. The EU should use its various forms of conditionality and leverage to push this political will further, and ensure that formal spaces for consultation and joint decision-making are integrated into the architecture of the transition process.

7.2. Specific Recommendations: Supporting Student Protests and Re-Democratisation Process in Serbia

Since 2019, Serbia has been categorized as a hybrid regime according to the Freedom House Index. The decline in democratic values traces back to 2016, coinciding with President Aleksandar Vučić's initial bid for the presidency under the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). The consolidation of power by the SNS intersected with the emergence of the first major public outcry against the government's ambitious "Belgrade Waterfront" project. Subsequently, annual protests against the government have been a recurrent theme, led by various democratic entities including political parties, formal civil society groups, and spontaneous citizen associations.

The most recent and vigorous demonstrations being conducted since December 2024 are led by students from multiple state universities in Serbia. These protests originated as a collective mourning for the 16 individuals who tragically lost their lives in the collapse of the Novi Sad train station canopy on 01 November 2024 at 11:52am. The station's renovation was part of a broader effort to modernize the railway connecting Novi Sad to Subotica on the Hungarian border and onward to Budapest, funded through the Belt and Road Initiative involving China, Serbia, and Hungary. On 22 November, tensions peaked when municipal officials from Novi Beograd (affiliated with the SNS) physically assaulted students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDA) who were demonstrating outside their institution. Outraged by the lack of police protection, the students barricaded the faculty premises. This sparked a wave of solidarity across other faculties, leading to widespread street blockades in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Nis, and other Serbian cities at 11:52 for 16 minutes each day.

For the past four months, this form of protest has persisted, with additional democratic mobilization efforts occurring approximately every 15 days. The students made four demands to the government: 1) render public all documents related to railway modernization; 2) hold the attackers of FDA students accountable through prosecution; 3) cease the prosecution of student protesters; 4) increase government funding for higher education by 20%. While these demands are specifically linked to the incident and issues related to university students, the protests have also sparked an initiation of efforts to combat political and economic corruption. In this way, the ongoing demonstrations underscore a deepening crisis in Serbia's democratic governance.

Indeed, the protests have cracked open a window of opportunity by which bottom-up actors can secure democratic gains. The movement's most significant achievement lies in its broad democratic mobilization, reminiscent of the anti-Milošević protests and the Bulldozer revolution of 05 October 2000, albeit with distinct characteristics in scale and impact. Students have successfully united workers, artists, educators, scholars, and small business owners, bridging societal divides in terms of class, ideology, and political beliefs. This mobilization has evolved into a movement advocating for the democratization of decision-making processes, the decentralization of government institutions, and a fundamental shift in the perception of civic engagement.

In March 2025, students put forth an institutional proposal for civic decision-making, endorsing the Local Government Law. Article 69 of this law permits citizens to engage directly in decision-making through the organization of citizen assemblies known as "Zbor." Thus far, more than a dozen informal citizen assemblies have been convened, primarily in support of the students' demands, while also addressing local issues such as education policies and press freedoms at the community level. In essence, the expanded political demands, which extend beyond the original four stipulated by the students, are not solely aimed at undermining the authority of Aleksandar Vučić and the SNS. Instead, they seek to lay the groundwork for a new participatory political culture focused on fostering greater citizen involvement and influence in governance processes.

In light of this moment, the EU can play a critical role in supporting bottom-up actors to meaningful push forward democratization in Serbia. Specifically, the EU should:

- **Establish and Maintain Consistent Communication Channels between the European Commission and the Serbian Opposition:** Since the democratic transformations in 2000, the European Union (EU) has emerged as Serbia's primary international partner. Over the past two decades, a sense of euro-optimism has flourished among Serbian citizens. However, the sluggish progress of EU integrations, inconsistencies in EU policies in the Western Balkans, and the issue of Kosovo have fueled a rise in euroscepticism in Serbia, with only approximately 50% of the population now supporting EU integration. Likewise, the political opposition has shown skepticism towards EU political figures, especially those within the EPP group. Nonetheless, the recent surge in student protests has sparked a renewed hope for fostering trust between the EU and Serbian citizens. To maintain a non-intrusive stance in Serbian domestic affairs, the EU must foster better relations with the opposition, not solely with the ruling party and select civil society organizations.

- **Offer Training to Civil Society on Public Policy Formation to Help Articulate Pro-EU Policies that Resonate with Opposition Supporters:** The European Commission is closely monitoring developments in Serbia but refrains from direct mediation between the conflicting parties. While the EU historically played a pivotal role in mediating during the 1996 protests involving Milošević, the opposition, and students (through the OSCE mission led by Felipe Gonzales), current circumstances are viewed as distinct. Following a meeting with Aleksandar Vučić on 26 March 2025, the EU issued a strong statement urging the government to prioritize EU reforms, particularly in areas such as media freedom, anti-corruption measures, and electoral reform. This stance aligns with the demands of the protesting citizens. Nonetheless, the EU can help promote such democratic gains while also further EU integration processes by providing civil society actors with the necessary technical expertise to formulate public policies and contribute to policymaking processes. This would not only act as a means of indirectly placing pressure on the government but also would ensure that policy recommendations are aligned with the priorities of protestors.

- **Establish a Direct and Collaborative Network between the EU Parliament and Democratic Forces in Serbia:** The European Parliament is perceived by many pro-EU Serbians as the most proactive and anti-authoritarian EU entity. While the EU Parliament has not yet discussed a resolution condemning the government's actions against student protests in Serbia, the active engagement of certain EU Members of Parliament (MPs) has been encouraging for the protesters. On 19 March 2025, 32 MPs signed a letter urging the President of the EU

Commission to cancel her meeting with Vučić, signaling direct support for the protesters' demands. This gesture was seen as a positive step towards condemning Vučić and the SNS for their lack of transparency and the democratic regression in Serbia. Enhanced involvement of the EU Parliament is viewed by various democratic stakeholders in Serbia as a means to bolster democratic endeavors through a legitimate EU institution. to foster interpersonal trust between representatives from both sides.

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