



EMBRACE

Policy Brief 04

**Advancing Democratic Development in Authoritarian
and Hybrid Regimes:
The Need for Context-Aware EU Strategies**

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1 Introduction to the EMBRACE project

The EMBRACE research project (2022-2025) 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 policymakers 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 Background and Context

Authoritarian and hybrid regimes in the European Neighbourhood continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience against democratisation efforts, relying on a combination of coercive measures and legitimising narratives to maintain power. The European Union's (EU) efforts to promote democracy are crucial but often face challenges in addressing the complex and entrenched dynamics of these regimes. Work Package 5 (WP5) of the EMBRACE project investigates episodes of political contestation in four such regimes: Serbia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Lebanon. This research focuses on understanding how 'blockage elites', who obstruct democratic will-formation, can be challenged to open space for democratic development.

The EMBRACE project identified significant challenges facing democratic actors across these regimes. In each case, the ruling elites employed both coercion and ideological narratives to secure and reinforce their legitimacy. This dual approach to governance allowed them to counter not only external pressures but also internal contestation from opposition groups and civil society. The EU's role in democracy support was examined, particularly in terms of how its policies and practices affected these dynamics. Despite the EU's efforts, its democracy support strategies often face limitations due to competing priorities, such as economic interests and the need for geopolitical stability. This can unintentionally reinforce authoritarian rule.

3 Key Findings

The resilience of entrenched elites was a recurring theme across all four case studies. These elites demonstrated remarkable adaptability, using a combination of coercive actions – such as repression, surveillance, and censorship – and consensual practices to maintain public acquiescence. The ruling elites in these regimes employed legitimising narratives that often centred on nationalism, economic development, or cultural unity to secure public consent. In Serbia, for example, nationalism played a dual role as both a tool of hegemonic control and a potential point of leverage for contesting actors.

Despite the highly restrictive political environments, the report identified opportunities for contestation. In Serbia, protests against a proposed lithium mine in the Jadar region (2022-2023) exemplified how cross-class coalitions could be mobilised to challenge entrenched interests. These protests disrupted the regime's legitimacy, delaying the project and demonstrating the importance of coalition-building across societal divides. However, not all attempts at contestation were equally successful. Belarus' 2020 protests against President Alexander Lukashenka's fraudulent election illustrated both the potential for broad-based mobilisation and the harsh limits imposed by repression. Although the protests were suppressed, the Belarusian democratic forces established robust institutional structures in exile, demonstrating their continued resilience and capacity to contest hegemonic narratives.

The EU's role in democracy support was assessed across all case studies. While the EU supported democratic development through various policy tools and funding mechanisms, these efforts were often undermined by competing strategic priorities. In Serbia, the EU's interest in securing lithium for its green energy transition resulted in support for mining projects that were opposed by local communities. Similarly, in Azerbaijan, the EU's energy partnerships with the authoritarian regime diluted its already limited emphasis on human rights. Such actions frustrate local democratic actors, who perceive the EU as prioritising its own economic interests over its stated democratic values.

Country-specific insights highlight the diversity of challenges and opportunities. In Serbia, the mobilisation of a broad coalition around environmental concerns illustrated the potential of framing issues in ways that transcend traditional political divisions. In Belarus, the establishment of a democratic government-in-exile underscored the importance of sustained international support for exiled opposition forces. In Azerbaijan, civil society actors face immense constraints, with the regime's suppression of dissent complicating any meaningful democratic opening. Lebanon presented a distinct case, where vibrant civil society efforts were hampered by systemic corruption and deeply entrenched sectarian politics.

4 Challenges to EU Democracy Support

One of the primary challenges facing the EU's democracy support efforts is the tension between strategic interests and democratic values. The EU often prioritises economic or geopolitical stability over the support of democratic reforms, which can lead to inconsistent messaging and reduced credibility among contesting actors. This is particularly evident in contexts where the EU engages with authoritarian leaders for economic cooperation, inadvertently reinforcing the legitimacy of these regimes.

Hybrid regimes present additional complexities. These regimes often adopt democratic façades, such as controlled elections and limited media freedom, that make it difficult to distinguish genuine democratic openings from superficial reforms. The ability of such regimes to co-opt opposition forces and civil society further complicates efforts to promote democratic change.

Another significant challenge is the limited engagement with grassroots movements. EU democracy support strategies tend to focus on high-level, top-down reforms, often overlooking the potential of grassroots actors to drive sustainable democratic change. Local civil society organisations, particularly those operating in rural and underserved areas, are critical to fostering bottom-up political transformation. Yet, they often receive insufficient support from international actors.

5 Country-specific policy implications

5.1. Azerbaijan

The legitimacy of blockage elites in Azerbaijan is (unintendedly) reinforced by EU external interventions in a threefold way: 1) through the EU's prioritisation of geopolitical and economic interests in its relationship with Azerbaijan; 2) as the Azerbaijani government exploits the EU's positioning in the Armenia-Azerbaijani conflict to clamp down on Western-funded civil society; and 3) as the EU's strategy for civil society support ends up legitimising authoritarian practices. In this context, the EU's potential role in supporting factors and actors that attempt to question the hegemonic consensus remains ambiguous.

While the EU considers itself as the main donor for Azerbaijani civil society, civil society respondents were critical of the EU's support strategy and the ways in which this reinforces the regime's grip over civil society. Since the 2013-14 crackdown, the local EU Delegation has been providing subgrants through UN agencies, mostly to NGOs that are non-political or not critical of the government; at the same time, it has relied on the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) to support the critical activists with small grants from abroad (Luciani 2023).

With regards to how the EU could support contesting actors and particularly civil society in Azerbaijan, the research provided a mixed picture, which also reflects ideological and generational fractures within the local civil society. On the one hand, some respondents argued that the EU should be more active, both in supporting the families of political prisoners and monitoring court hearings, as well as in responding to the smear campaigns on civil society and anti-Western rhetoric. Those respondents did not believe that the EU would ever suspend diplomatic or energy cooperation with Azerbaijan, but were hopeful that some small steps could be taken to change the 'business-as-usual' approach. On the other hand, other respondents expressed scepticism and a critique of the underlying logics behind the EU's *modus operandi*.

Some youth-led civic initiatives refuse power relations with donors and advocate for alternative ways of sustaining socio-political activism (Luciani 2023). Along these lines, some interviewees suggested that topics such as gender and peacebuilding are currently less antagonised by the government, which may render cooperation between the EU and civil society possible in these fields. However, others considered that any (government-approved) cooperation in this field would necessarily be constrained by the hegemonic narratives – such as militarisation, toxic masculinity and state-centric, authoritarian peace – eventually reinforcing rather than challenging them.

5.2 Belarus

International support for democracy and democratisation has been essential for the Belarusian democratic forces, especially given the challenges posed by both domestic and cross-border repression, limited movement due to Belarusian citizens' non-EU status, and the regime's complicity in Russia's war against Ukraine. It is crucial for international actors to differentiate between the Belarusian government and its people, offering support to those striving for democratic change, while also prioritising attention to human rights violations.

The EU is a key democracy promoter for Belarus. The EU traditionally focuses on structural support, such as cultural, economic, and educational initiatives, while collaborating with authorities to improve rule of law and democratic standards, with long-term, project-based support. Yet, the EU's principled approach towards Belarus has often been accompanied by a more pragmatic engagement focus, such as cooperation on migration and border management, creating tensions between EUDP and the EU's security priorities (Bosse 2025). However, since 2020, the EU's approach has shifted to EUDP focused exclusively on the democratic forces within and especially in exile, including pro-democratic opposition and civil society groups.

Support from the EU and its member states has played a crucial role in sustaining Belarusian democratic forces, particularly since 2020. In response to the ongoing repression, the EU has significantly adjusted its approach to Belarus (EU Council 2024), implementing various measures aimed at strengthening civil society and pressuring the regime. This shift is evident in the EU's increasing focus on supporting non-state actors, such as civil society organisations and independent media, rather than providing assistance to state authorities. Diplomatic engagement has also evolved, with the EU reducing contact with the Belarusian regime while prioritising high-level communication with Belarusian democratic forces and civil society, notably through the EU-Belarus Consultative Group¹ established in 2023. This shift in strategy has provided legitimacy and vital support to the Belarusian opposition in exile, helping to sustain its efforts for democratic change.

In addition to diplomatic and financial support, the EU has played a key role in facilitating the relocation and re-establishment of Belarusian CSOs in exile, enabling civil society groups to continue their work from neighbouring countries. The EU has also committed to a €3 billion comprehensive plan for Belarus, which outlines a framework for the country's future democratic transition. To further support the Belarusian opposition, the EU has ensured flexibility in its reporting and implementation requirements, adapting to the challenging security conditions faced by activists. The EU's efforts also extend to academic support through the EU4Belarus initiative, which aids Belarusian students and researchers within the EU. Furthermore, the European Parliament has adopted a non-recognition policy regarding

¹ <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/belarus-eu-launches-new-consultative-group-with-democratic-forces-and-civil-society/>

Lukashenka's presidency and has backed the "WeStandBYyou" initiative, through which individual MEPs have taken a stand in solidarity with political prisoners in Belarus.

The EU's approach to supporting Belarusian democratic forces has faced significant challenges and limitations, four of which are listed here:

Slow response to developments in Belarus

As one interviewee noted, the words of EU Foreign Affairs Chief Josep Borrell – "too little, too slow" – capture the frustration many feel regarding the EU's delayed actions in addressing the situation in Belarus. This sentiment reflects broader dissatisfaction with the pace of EU engagement, particularly when compared to the urgency of the crisis (Bosse 2021; Yahorau 2024). Several interviewees also emphasised that, given the high stakes for lives and livelihoods, the EU could have done more to act in line with its stated values and commitments, rather than just speaking about them. The perceived slow pace of action is especially evident in the application of EU sanctions, where many argue that they could and should be implemented more swiftly in response to ongoing human rights violations. To address this limitation, the EU should establish a dedicated Belarus Crisis Response Team within the European External Action Service. This team would be responsible for continuously monitoring developments in Belarus and proposing immediate actions to address emerging situations. By having a specialised team focused on Belarus, the EU can ensure that it remains informed and ready to act swiftly as circumstances evolve.

The EU should also implement a fast-track decision-making process specifically for Belarus-related issues. This process would allow for quicker adoption of sanctions and support measures, ensuring that the EU's actions are timely and aligned with the urgency of the crisis. By streamlining decision-making procedures, the EU can respond more effectively to human rights violations and other pressing concerns. It is also crucial for the EU to develop pre-approved contingency plans for various scenarios in Belarus. These plans should outline specific actions to be taken in response to different developments, enabling swift implementation when triggered. Having these contingency plans in place would allow the EU to act decisively and consistently, reducing delays and enhancing its overall responsiveness to the situation in Belarus.

Bureaucratic funding procedures

Second, the bureaucratic nature of EU funding mechanisms has impeded the EU's ability to respond flexibly and quickly to the rapidly changing political situation in Belarus. This structural inflexibility has often hindered the EU's capacity to provide timely and effective support to Belarusian CSOs. To address the bureaucratic nature of EU funding mechanisms, one key suggestion is the creation of a dedicated Belarus Democracy Support Fund, designed with simplified application and disbursement procedures. This fund would reduce bureaucratic delays and allow for more efficient and targeted support of democratic initiatives

in Belarus. Additionally, implementing a two-tier funding system—combining rapid response grants for immediate needs and long-term strategic funding for sustained support—would enable the EU to address both urgent and ongoing democratic efforts more effectively. Furthermore, delegating more decision-making authority to EU delegations and local partners would allow for faster reactions to emerging situations on the ground, ensuring timely support when it is most critical.

To enhance flexibility, it is recommended that the EU adopt measures like allowing flexible budget reallocation within approved projects. This would enable grantees to adjust funds in response to evolving needs, ensuring that financial support remains impactful in changing circumstances. Another suggestion is to introduce rolling application deadlines for certain funding streams, allowing organisations to apply for funding as needs arise, rather than being constrained by rigid deadlines. Finally, forming partnerships with intermediary organisations that can efficiently distribute EU funds to grassroots initiatives would provide a more agile mechanism for supporting local efforts. These organisations, with their knowledge of local contexts, can ensure that funds are allocated in the most effective manner to meet urgent and targeted needs on the ground.

Lack of strategy

Third, the EU's lack of a clear, long-term strategy for Belarus has further complicated its response. Despite over four years passing since the 2020 protests, the absence of a comprehensive and coordinated EU strategy has already led to inconsistent actions and overlapping initiatives that have, at times, diluted the impact of EU support for Belarusian democratic forces (Clingendael Spectator 2023). To address the lack of a long-term strategy for Belarus, the EU should take steps to create a clear, coordinated approach, for example by establishing a high-level EU-Belarus Strategy Working Group to draft a 5-10 year strategic plan, incorporating input from Belarusian democratic forces and CSOs, and EU member states. This group would define clear strategic objectives, milestones, and success indicators for EU engagement with Belarus. Additionally, the EU should appoint a Special Representative for Belarus to oversee strategy implementation and ensure coordination across EU institutions. Regular meetings among EU bodies, member states, and key partners would facilitate information sharing and align efforts. Creating a shared database of EU-funded grants would also help CSOs and other actors to find and access the grant opportunities.

Russia's influence

Finally, the EU has struggled to counter Russia's influence in Belarus, with interviewees noting that it is challenging to restore democracy in a country so dependent on Russia. Russia's threat to Belarusian sovereignty, independence, and culture further complicates the EU's efforts to craft a coherent and distinct policy toward Belarus. Apart from further cooperation with the democratic forces on this issue, further investment in cultural exchanges and Belarusian

language programs by the EU would help to strengthen national identity and resilience against Russian influence.

Additionally, the EU should expand support for independent media both within Belarus and in exile, providing technical assistance, capacity-building, and sustained financial support to ensure the free flow of information. More generally, the EU should think beyond the current status quo in Belarus and prepare for a range of potential scenarios, including the possibility that increased military support for Ukraine and intensified economic pressure on Russia could weaken Russia's influence on Belarus and thereby also the Belarusian regime. To this end, the EU should develop detailed contingency plans for various outcomes, such as violent crackdown, regime collapse, negotiated transition, or gradual reform, with specific actions and support measures outlined for each scenario. Strengthening ties with Belarusian democratic forces, civil society organisations, and diaspora communities is crucial to enable swift engagement should political shifts occur. Finally, the EU should prepare substantial economic packages for a potential democratic transition, while enhancing coordination with international partners like the United States, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and EU member states, ensuring a unified and effective response to developments in Belarus.

5.3 Lebanon

The relationship between international donors, such as the EU and US, and Lebanese civil society organizations (CSOs) reveals both the potential and challenges of external support. While international actors provide essential financial and technical resources, their involvement is often accompanied by conditions and constraints that undermine the autonomy and effectiveness of civil society.

The transactional nature of international support limits the ability of NGOs to push for deeper reforms. In pursuit of funding, some organizations may compromise their ability to challenge elite power structures, leading to dependency on donor-driven projects. This dependency leaves civil society active on the surface but restricted in enacting real transformation. Furthermore, alignment with donor interests often results in a shift away from addressing the root causes of Lebanon's crises, such as corruption and sectarianism, toward less disruptive, project-based goals.

Moreover, donors' stringent conditions create challenges for CSOs, forcing them to adapt their activities to fit predefined frameworks rather than addressing pressing local needs. This has resulted in more restrictive oversight, limiting the flexibility and capacity of civil society organizations to innovate or respond to urgent issues. The lack of unconditional support frustrates civil society actors, who feel constrained by the donors' demands.

While the EU's platforms, such as the 3RF (framework for reform, recovery, and reconstruction) consultative group, provided some opportunities for advocacy and reform efforts, CSO emphasized that these platforms remain insufficient without stronger engagement from decision-makers. Activists stressed that international support needs to

move beyond consultation and evolve into genuine partnerships with civil society, ensuring that aid priorities align with local needs.

-  Donors should transition from development-focused aid, such as training programs, to support initiatives aimed at political change and structural reform. Lebanon's challenges are political and structural, so donors need to focus on dismantling elite control and sectarian governance rather than addressing surface-level corruption alone.
-  International actors must engage deeply with local civil society throughout the design, planning, and implementation stages of projects. Building trust through meaningful partnerships will increase the relevance and effectiveness of reforms.
-  Rather than prioritizing large NGOs with donor-driven agendas, donors should focus on grassroots movements, labor unions, and member-led organizations such as cooperatives and depositors' unions. This shift would create sustainable pressure from the bottom up, challenging elite control and promoting deeper reforms.
-  Donors should also support independent media and public policy think tanks to generate evidence-based research and shape public discourse. These institutions play a crucial role in holding elites accountable and promoting transparency.
-  To counter the "NGO-ization" of civil society, where non-political development projects are prioritized over meaningful activism, donors need to fund movements committed to structural reform. Supporting politically engaged organizations will address the root causes transactional relationships that prioritise economic or geopolitical interests over democracy.
-  Although controversial, donors should also consider providing direct support to reformist political parties and unions capable of challenging elite dominance. Strategic political funding is essential for creating a real balance of power in Lebanon.
-  Donors must act as enablers, not decision-makers, by empowering civil society to take ownership of reforms. This shift will ensure that local actors have both the resources and authority to implement sustainable reforms.
-  Engagement with elites must be contingent on meaningful reforms. Donors should avoid legitimizing political elites unless accompanied by systemic change. Initiatives must include anti-corruption mechanisms and judicial reforms to hold elites accountable.
-  Donors need to prioritize long-term investments in capacity building and institutional support, moving away from short-term, symbolic projects. Sustainable change requires continuity and commitment.
-  Finally, donors must avoid fragmented efforts by promoting coordination across international partners. Cross-donor collaboration will enhance the overall impact of international support and ensure coherent strategies.

5.4 Serbia

The EU prioritized other interests over democracy promotion in Serbia. In the first episode, the government was rewarded for its fiscally conservative policies while its gradual dismantling of Serbian democracy was largely ignored or seen as a second-order issue. In the second episode, the EU remain steadfast in its support for the lithium mine even to the extent of signing a strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, battery value chains and electric vehicles with the Serbian government *after* regime's repressive response to anti-mining mobilization, and in the wake of several round of blatantly rigged elections that the opposition either boycotted or protested afterwards. The interest in lithium required for the EU's green new deal is understandable and legitimate, and so was the EU's concern for fiscal consolidation of Serbia. But the EU's pursuit of these goals and the political support it has given to the Serbian regime have vastly overshadowed the support that the EU is providing to Serbian civil society through the EUDP measures, or the vague diplomatic criticism of the regime's authoritarianism that the EU annual reports do include. This has been causing great frustration for the civil society activists and liberal politicians in Serbia who have spent decades arguing in favour of the EU future for Serbia.

By contrast, the blockage elites who pay lip service to the EU integration, but pursue politics of foreign policy equidistance between the EU, Russia, China, and the US, and prosecute their internal rivals as "Serb-hating pro-Western traitors" feel vindicated in their assessment that the EU's democracy promotion policy is all rhetoric and no substance. While these blockage elites are pragmatic enough not to reject purely transactional relations with the EU, they remain utterly uninterested in pursuing reforms required by the EU accession process. Given the declining support for Vučić's regime within Serbia, the blockage elites who benefit from the status quo are increasingly pushing the regime into actions that are rekindling internal and regional tensions. With this in mind, it is time for the EU to put democracy promotion on an equal footing with the pursuit of its other interests in Serbia. The question is not how to better design the EUDP policies, but rather one of mustering political will within the EU to take the EUDP and EU enlargement seriously again. This would help the genuinely pro-democratic and pro-European forces in Serbia, and it would also represent the best long-term basis for the EU to meets its other goals in the Western Balkan region.

6 Policy Recommendations

Apart from country-specific recommendations, a number of recommendations for EU policymakers and other external democracy support actors can be offered across the four countries.

Adopt a Nuanced and Long-Term Approach

-  Develop tailored democracy support strategies that address the specific political, cultural, and economic contexts of target countries.
-  Shift from short-term tactical goals to long-term capacity building for civil society and reformist actors.

Balance Strategic Interests with Democratic Values

-  Avoid transactional relationships that prioritise economic or geopolitical interests over democracy.
-  Introduce conditionalities for economic partnerships, ensuring that human rights and democratic governance are integral components.

Support Grassroots Movements

-  Enhance funding and technical assistance for local NGOs, grassroots coalitions, and independent media, particularly in rural and underserved areas.
-  Promote inclusive approaches that engage marginalised communities, fostering broad-based support for democratic reforms.

Strengthen EU Messaging and Coherence

-  Ensure consistency in EU public diplomacy by aligning strategic narratives with democracy support objectives.
-  Counter hegemonic narratives propagated by authoritarian regimes through targeted communication campaigns.

Leverage Strategic Tools

-  Deploy targeted sanctions against authoritarian elites while supporting reformist elements within hybrid regimes.
-  Use trade agreements and aid programmes as levers to incentivise democratic reforms.

Enhance Support for Exiled Democratic Forces

-  Facilitate the institutionalisation of exiled opposition groups, providing platforms for them to engage with international stakeholders.
-  Invest in cross-border initiatives to maintain connections between diaspora communities and in-country activists.

Foster Regional Collaboration

-  Promote regional dialogue and knowledge exchange among democracy advocates in the EU neighbourhood.
-  Encourage joint initiatives between EU member states and regional partners to reinforce democratic norms.

7 Conclusion

The findings from the EMBRACE project underscore the need for a holistic, context-sensitive approach to democracy support. By addressing both coercive and hegemonic practices, the EU can potentially better navigate the complexities of authoritarian and hybrid regimes. Supporting grassroots movements, empowering civil society, and better aligning strategic interests with democratic values will be critical to fostering sustainable democratic change and to support democratic forces and civil society more effectively.

Reaffirming its commitment to democracy, the EU must translate its rhetoric into consistent policies and actions that resonate with contesting actors and local populations. As global geopolitical tensions intensify, strengthening democratic governance in its neighbourhood will not only support democratic aspirations but also enhance the security in the long term.

The resilience of authoritarian regimes presents significant challenges to EU democracy support efforts. However, as illustrated by the EMBRACE project, spaces for contestation exist even in the most restrictive environments. By adopting nuanced, inclusive, and context-aware strategies, the EU can potentially better support democratic development in its neighbourhood, by striking a more careful balance between promoting both its values and strategic interests.

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