



EMBRACE

Policy Brief 08

Obstacles and facilitators of EU democracy promotion

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Content

1	Introduction to the EMBRACE project.....	3
2	Introduction to this policy brief.....	4
3	Obstacles and facilitators to EU democracy promotion	4
4	Empirical evidence from EMBRACE.....	7
	4.1 Domestic level obstacles in the European neighbourhood.....	7
	4.2 EU-level obstacles in the European neighbourhood	7
	4.3 International level obstacles in the European neighbourhood.....	8
	4.4 Facilitators in the European neighbourhood.....	8
5	Policy recommendations	9
6	References.....	10

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 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 brief

While the EU possesses a wide range of tools and instruments to promote democracy in its neighbourhood, the effectiveness of these efforts depends on a variety of factors that can either facilitate or hinder democratisation. These factors, which we conceptualize as obstacles and facilitators, operate at domestic, EU, and international levels, shaping the environment in which democracy promotion takes place and influencing the choices of both local and EU actors. This policy brief introduces a structured framework for understanding these obstacles and facilitators, provides empirical evidence from the EMBRACE project, and identifies practical strategies for addressing obstacles and leveraging enabling conditions to enhance the impact of the EU's democracy promotion efforts.

3 Obstacles and facilitators to EU democracy promotion

We define obstacles as factors that hinder the process, whether they persist over time or emerge intermittently. These can take various forms, such as non-democratic behaviour by political actors, malfunctioning institutions, or structural conditions that are not conducive to democratic development. These obstacles can manifest at the domestic, regional, or international levels. While a single obstacle may not completely prevent democratisation efforts, multiple obstacles acting together can create significant barriers, often leading to system closure that undermines external efforts to promote democracy. Some of these obstacles may even arise directly from political decisions made by key actors.

Facilitators, on the other hand, are conditions that support and enhance democratisation. These include democratic behaviour by key actors, functioning political institutions, and favourable structural conditions, and they can also exist at domestic, regional, or international levels. While a single facilitator may have limited impact, multiple facilitators combined can create openings for democratisation, allowing democracy to develop even under external pressure or difficult internal conditions.

We can categorize obstacles and facilitators at three levels: domestic (national), regional (EU), and international and in three dimensions: institutions, actors and structures (for an overview, see Table 1).

Dimension Level	1. Institutions	2. Actors	3. Structures
1. Domestic politics	Quality of state institutions: electoral system and the rule of law	Constellations of actors, access to political power	State capacity, socio-economic development, historical legacies, societal cohesion, peace and conflict

2. Regional/EU politics	Quality of EU institutions, quality of decision-making rules and procedures	Constellations of actors and diverging objectives	The structure of interdependency
3. International politics	Membership in international organisations, international treaties	Constellations of alliances, alliance-formation/co-operation with alternative (regional) powers	International economic and security rivalry, neighbourhood effects

Table 1: Facilitators and obstacles to democratisation and democracy promotion

At the domestic level of a country, factors like electoral systems, rule of law, and the strength of checks and balances play a critical role in shaping democratisation. Well-functioning institutions ensure independent courts, accountable administrations, and the protection of fundamental rights. In contrast, weak or manipulated institutions—common in autocratic and hybrid regimes—serve the interests of ruling elites, undermine free elections, and block democratic reforms (Shyrokykh and Wintzen, 2025). For instance, ill-designed institutions, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina’s power-sharing system, can create deadlocks that block reforms and limit the impact of external democracy promotion efforts (Poggoda et al. 2023).

At the EU level, the quality of decision-making, institutional design, and the distribution of responsibilities across EU bodies play a significant role in democracy promotion. Similar to domestic institutions, well-designed EU institutions facilitate coherent and efficient action, and factors such as inconsistency and complexity of supranational and intergovernmental decision-making can allow member-state interests to interfere with policy making. Democracy promotion involves multiple EU bodies—the Council, the Commission, and the European Parliament—and, in the case of development assistance, individual member states, creating long chains of command and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Noutcheva, 2015; Bicchi, 2010; Grimm, 2019).

At the international level, institutional factors such as a country’s membership in international organizations and its alignment with international norms also influence democratisation. Treaties like the ICCPR or the UN Charter create shared expectations for democratic governance, human rights, and rule of law. However, authoritarian regimes can exploit these institutions to resist international pressure and promote illiberal norms. Countries that are members of organizations dominated by authoritarian regimes—like the Collective Security Treaty Organization or the Commonwealth of Independent States—often receive protection that helps stabilize non-democratic regimes (Dimitrova and Dragneva, 2009; Tolstrup, 2013). Conversely, participation in organizations like the EU or NATO, which

are oriented towards democratic governance, often incentivizes countries to implement reforms to meet membership criteria.

Actor-related factors are another key consideration. **At the domestic level, political elites, opposition parties, civil society, the media, and interest groups all play roles in either facilitating or obstructing democratic reforms** (Grimm and Weiffen, 2018). Authoritarian incumbents, especially in systems with weak accountability, can block reforms while maintaining a facade of compliance (Richter and Wunsch, 2020). Independent media and civil society organizations can serve as watchdogs and advocates for democratic change, but autocratic regimes often suppress these actors. **At the EU level, the interaction among EU bodies and member states shapes the EU's ability to promote democracy in neighboring countries.** Diverging interests, such as energy security or migration management, often lead to inconsistent policies that undermine the EU's credibility and effectiveness (Shyrokykh, 2018; Bosse, 2012; Shyrokykh and Solander, 2025). For example, the North Stream 2 pipeline project and slow adaptation to regional changes after the Arab Spring have allowed autocratic neighbors to exploit EU divisions (Noutcheva, 2015). Internationally, actor-related factors also play a role. Autocratic states like Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia offer alternative sources of aid and trade, which can reduce the pressure on neighboring countries to democratize and undermine Western efforts (Shyrokykh, 2022). Russia, for example, supports authoritarian regimes in Belarus and Central Asia, while China provides infrastructure projects in the Balkans without democratic conditions (Dreher et al., 2018). In contrast, economic or political dependence on democratic countries can encourage reform, as elites and societies may align more closely with democratic norms in exchange for trade, aid, or other benefits (Levitz and Pop-Eleches, 2010).

Finally, structural factors—such as state capacity, socio-economic development, and historical legacies on a domestic level—create an overarching context that influences democratisation. Strong state institutions, capable of effectively implementing reforms, are crucial for sustaining democratic stability. In contrast, weak states or corrupt governments hinder progress (Claassen and Magalhães, 2022). Socio-economic development, including higher levels of wealth, education, and social equality, also facilitates democratisation, while poverty and inequality create significant barriers (Lipset, 1959; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006). Societal cohesion, including trust between citizens and institutions and the inclusion of minorities and women, supports democratic consolidation, whereas divisions based on ethnicity, religion, or ideology can obstruct it. Additionally, historical factors like colonial legacies and past conflicts can shape state structures and societal trust, further influencing democratisation prospects (Grimm, 2019). **At the EU level, structural factors include the dependency of neighboring countries on the EU for trade, aid, and potential future membership.** This dependency provides leverage for democracy promotion, as the EU can incentivize reforms. However, the EU's own dependency on neighboring countries for security, energy, and resources often complicates its democracy promotion efforts, as pragmatic interests may take precedence over democratic ideals (Grimm, 2019; Bosse, 2012; Carnegie and Marinov, 2017; Shyrokykh, 2018). These structural asymmetries affect how effectively the EU can push for democratic reforms. **Internationally, structural factors such as geopolitical instability, economic competition, and reliance on non-democratic powers also shape democratisation.** Conflicts like Russia's war in Ukraine or military occupations in the Middle East can alter political dynamics and constrain the options available to domestic actors.

Economic ties with autocratic powers like China, which offer financial support without democratic conditions, further undermine Western democracy promotion. In countries dependent on authoritarian states for resources, such as Russia's influence in Armenia or Ukraine, the prospects for democratisation are significantly reduced.

4 Empirical evidence from EMBRACE

The findings of EMBRACE provide empirical evidence of these obstacles. Below, examples from EMBRACE's empirical work are presented pertaining to the three levels of obstacles presented. Following the examples, cases of facilitators and openings are provided.¹

4.1 Domestic level obstacles in the European neighbourhood

On an institutional level, we find that various domestic factors can impede the effectiveness of EUDP, this includes state capacity and corruption whereby we find that a strong state capacity is a conditional factor for aid effectiveness and corruption a mediating factor on various EUDP instrument effectiveness (Biedermann et al. manuscript under review; Solander manuscript under review).² **On an actor-level we find evidence of entrenched hegemonic elites obstructing democratisation** by sustaining power through repression, co-optation, and legitimizing narratives, with prospects for political change hinging on how domestic elites manage internal pressures and external ties (Bosse et al. 2025). Their “autocratic toolkit” includes manipulated elections, co-opted opposition and civil society, and legitimacy-building via social services, exemplified in Azerbaijan where Aliyev's regime has suppressed opposition and media, shifted toward “authoritarian technocracy” by replacing old elites with technocrats, and further weakened civil society through selective co-optation and repression (Abdallah et al. manuscript under review). Additionally, various structural blockages have been identified to hinder democratisation in authoritarian and hybrid regimes. We lift that certain **economic conditions and geopolitical contexts could potentially hinder democratisation as they often reinforce authoritarian rule.**

4.2 EU-level obstacles in the European neighbourhood

Turning to EU-level obstacles on an actor-level, EMBRACE finds multiple evidence of instances where EUDP can be hindered. We for instance find instances of EUDP being mediated by strategic interests which could hinder the effectiveness of EUDP as it could damage the credibility of the EU if it is perceived to use political conditionality favourably towards strategically important neighbours (Shyrokykh and Solander, 2025). We also find that while democracy-related resolutions issued by the European Parliament are generally driven by EU norms and values, populist and radical right-wing parties (PRRPs) are only associated with

¹ For a more comprehensive description of the blockages and the findings of EMBRACE, please see Grimm, Shyrokykh, Dudouet (eds.): *European Democracy Promotion in Turbulent Times*, Routledge 2026; and the Comparative Synthesis Report (D2.3).

² Manuscripts under review are not listed in the reference list in order not to compromise the double-blind review process. Once they are published they will be available on the EMBRACE project website open access.

issuing democracy resolutions when they are tied to strategic interests. This ultimately suggests that PRRPs engage with EU democracy promotion only when it serves their agendas, not based on the values of EU democracy promotion. (Solander et al. manuscript under review). **This inconsistency whereby certain EU-actors use democracy promotion in a strategic way could further impede on the credibility of the EU.** Furthermore, we find that EUDP can both be enhanced or hindered by average democracy levels within EU member states (Solander, manuscript under review). This can further be related to discussions of credibility - **if the EU does not practice what itself teaches and seeks to entice beyond its borders, then certain EUDP tools such as accession could be rendered ineffective.** Conversely, when average levels of democracy within the EU increase, instruments such as association conditionality are more effective in enticing democratisation. Besides this, EMBRACE highlights the EU's bureaucratic inefficiency and focus on short-term over sustainable change, exemplified by its slow, limited response to Belarus (Grimm, manuscript under review; Bosse et al. 2025). Similar patterns appear in gender-related support, where EUDP instruments often provide short-term, bureaucratic, or depoliticized aid to feminist and queer actors, limiting impact on structural inequalities (Hülzer et al. manuscript under review). Finally, the EU's pursuit of stability and top-down approaches can undermine its own democracy promotion, as seen after Azerbaijan's retaking of Nagorno-Karabakh, where geopolitical goals in Armenia overshadowed local security (Luciani, 2025). Such strategies risk sidelining bottom-up actors and weaken the EU's credibility as a genuine promoter of democracy.

4.3 International level obstacles in the European neighbourhood

On the international level, multiple structural blockages are identified pertaining to geopolitical instability throughout the neighbourhood. Examples include Ukraine, whose political trajectory is shaped by **tensions between external authoritarian pressures, mainly from Russia and with indirect support from China, and the domestic incentives linked to European integration** (Petrov and Sniadanko, manuscript under review). Similar geopolitical trends can be found elsewhere in the European neighbourhood. The geopolitical challenge of Russia is not only evident in Ukraine, but also in Belarus where **the EU faces significant challenges in countering Russia's influence, which complicates efforts to support democracy and national resilience** (Bosse et al. 2025). Aprasidze and Gvalia (2025) further posit that **China is poised to fill any vacuum should the EU scale back its EUDP efforts**, as illustrated by Georgia, where Beijing is increasingly asserting its presence.

4.4 Facilitators in the European neighbourhood

At the same time, various obstacles can serve not only as obstacles but also as facilitators. For instance, improvements in institutional qualities can enhance the effectiveness of EUDP and serve as facilitators whereas weakened institutional qualities can serve as obstacles and hinder EUDP effectiveness. It is therefore important that the EU is context-sensitive and considers the institutional, actor, and structural designs of countries to identify potential obstacles and facilitators and to adapt its democracy promotion accordingly. This requires moving beyond one-size-fits-all approaches, ensuring that support is tailored to local conditions, and engaging more meaningfully with bottom-up actors whose involvement can strengthen both the legitimacy and sustainability of democratic reforms. Moreover, fostering

inclusive civil society participation, building long-term partnerships with local institutions, and promoting cross-sectoral cooperation can help mitigate the risk of co-optation or fragmentation. By aligning external democracy promotion with domestic reform incentives, the EU can enhance local ownership, increase resilience against authoritarian pushback, and ultimately improve the credibility and effectiveness of its normative agenda.

5 Policy recommendations

Based on these findings, we provide *three* policy recommendations.

-  **Supporting grassroots movements and empowering civil society will be critical to fostering sustainable democratic change.** So far, EU democracy promotion is very much top-down driven and therefore risks being impeded by domestic-level obstacles. To manage this problem, EU democracy promotion could more effectively support bottom-up democratisation by helping civil society develop monitoring capacities, safeguarding transitions, and providing sustained backing to consolidate small-scale gains. Despite frustration with the EU's perceived inaction in the face of autocratisation and rights abuses, civil society and social movement actors still recognize the value of EU democracy support (Rennick et al. manuscript under review). Furthermore, to fully take public opinion into account, it is important to involve a wide range of civil society voices, beyond well-established and formally registered CSOs. In a developed civil society, there are usually NGOs specialising in specific topics, and although their expert opinion is valuable, it is also necessary to support lesser-known actors. This helps to avoid the monopolisation of the public voice by certain individuals or organisations (Koval and Latsyba, 2025).
-  **The EU must translate its rhetoric into consistent policies and actions and should act more decisively in line with its stated values.** A clear consensus emerges that the EU has an important role but must play it more credibly and in line with its stated values to overcome obstacles to effective democracy promotion that are located inside the EU. The EU often prioritizes economic or geopolitical stability over the support of democratic reforms, which can lead to inconsistent messaging and reduced credibility among contesting actors (Rennick et al. manuscript under review). This is also particularly evident in contexts where the EU engages with authoritarian leaders for economic cooperation, inadvertently reinforcing the legitimacy of these regimes (Bosse et al. 2025).
-  **The EU should clearly signal to allies and rivals where it normatively stands and that it is willing to defend and protect democracy and does so.** To remain a credible and attractive actor in geopolitical terms, the EU should stick to its own normative foundations and defend and live by these norms, for the sake of creating and maintaining a space of free and inclusive societies (e.g. Bosse et al. 2025). Free and inclusive societies promote economic growth by fostering productivity, employment,

and innovation, while also improving social outcomes such as reduced poverty and inequality, better health and education, and greater peace and stability. Individuals benefit from increased dignity, empowerment, and well-being, leading to more resilient communities and a more just and democratic society for all. Hence, the EU should actively engage to create such a space and hint to the advantages of this approach.

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