



EMBRACE

Policy Brief 09

Democracy and the effects of democracy promotion in the European neighbourhood

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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 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

This policy brief reviews the state of democracy in the European neighbourhood, evaluates EU democracy promotion strategies, and incorporates findings from Work Package 3 (WP3). It first assesses existing approaches, then highlights WP3 insights on key challenges, and concludes with recommendations for strengthening future EU democracy promotion efforts.

3 Democracy in the European neighbourhood

Democracy in the European neighbourhood faces a complex and evolving set of challenges. While the European Union (EU) itself remains a leading proponent of democratic values globally, the surrounding region has seen a mixture of progress and setbacks in terms of democratic governance. Many of these nations are geographically close to the EU and have historical, cultural, and economic ties to it. However, political instability, governance issues, and internal conflicts often undermine the broader push for democratic consolidation.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), launched in 2004, aimed to foster stability, security, and prosperity in these neighbouring regions by promoting democratic reforms, economic integration, and political dialogue. In practice, however, the outcomes have been varied. While some countries have made notable strides towards democratic governance, others have experienced backsliding or the entrenchment of authoritarian regimes. Ultimately, suggesting that the EU's soft power through democracy promoting tools has had a limited ability to shape political outcomes in its vicinity.

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the state of democracy as of 2023, highlighting the stark contrast between the lower levels of democratic development in the neighbouring countries and the higher levels of democracy within Union's member states. The figure underscores the continued democratic divide between the EU and its neighbours.

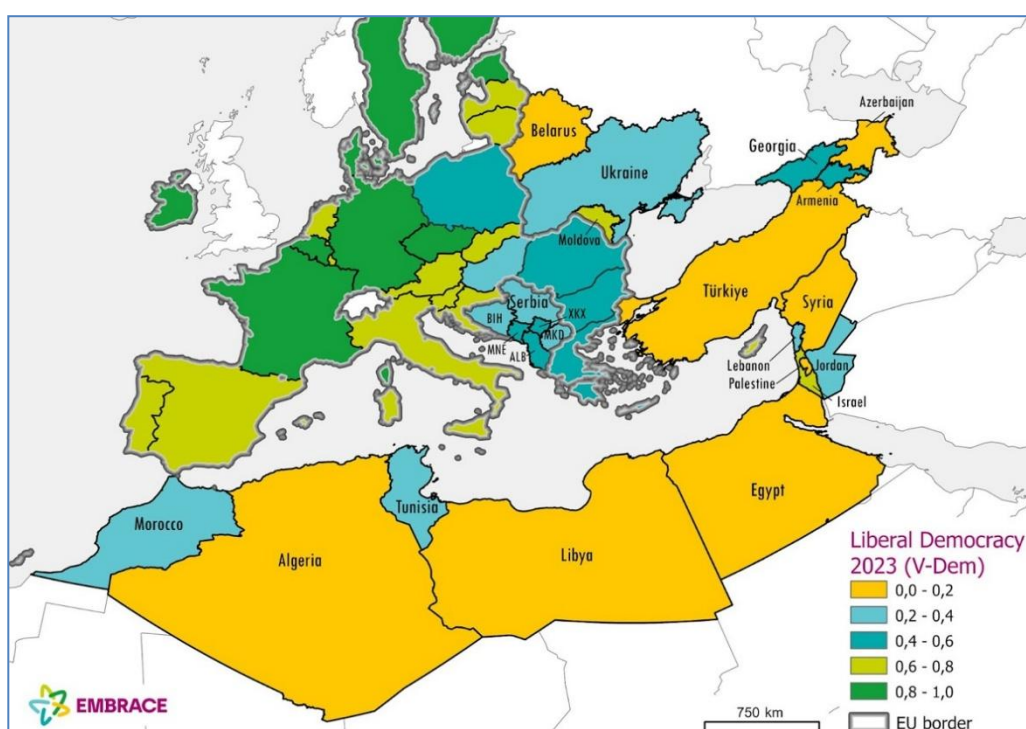
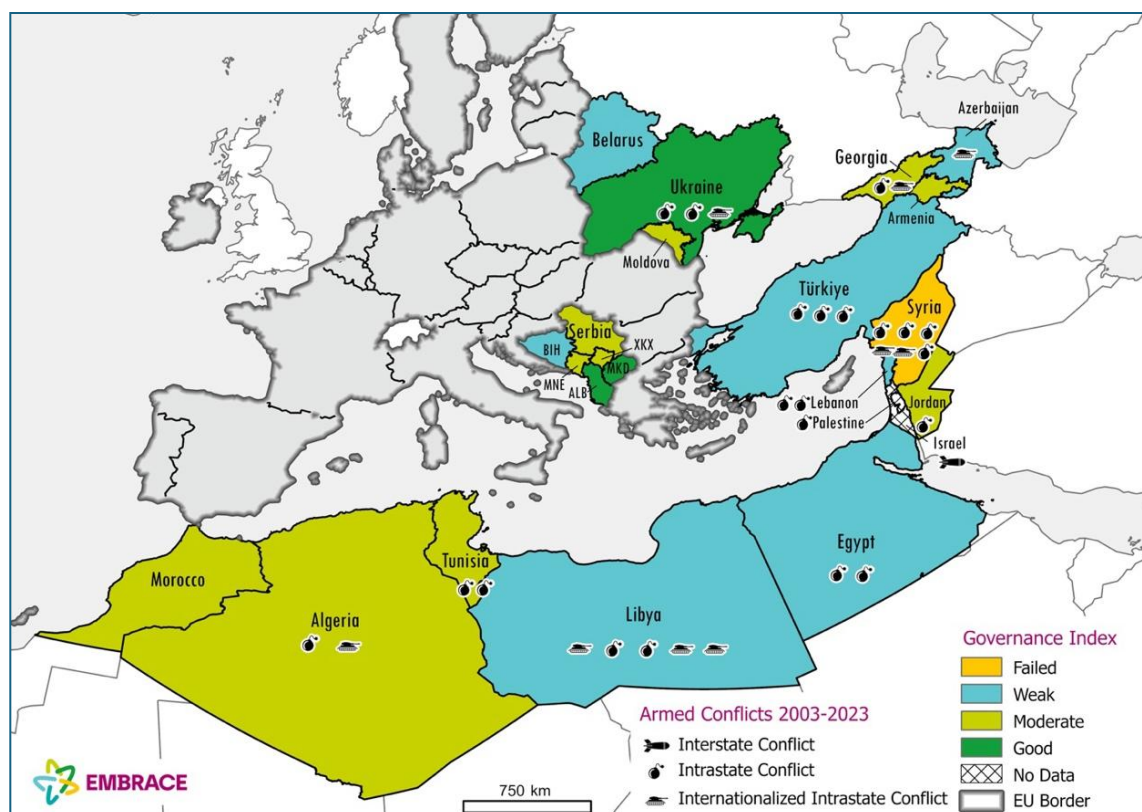


Figure 1. State of democracy in the neighborhood 2023**Map designed by:** Josep Ramon Modol Rates (Lleida University).**Data source:** <https://v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/>.**Note:** The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index ranges from 0 (lowest score) to 1 (highest score). For more info see: <https://v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/>

4 Why is democracy promotion not effective?

One key reason democracy promotion is less effective than intended lies in the competing policy objectives, differing concepts of democracy, and hidden agendas of those promoting it. Despite efforts to coordinate democracy promotion, there is no clear consensus among major European actors—including the EU, its member states, the OSCE, and the European Council—on its precise goals. These actors (1) disagree on the specific objectives of democracy promotion, (2) differ in their interpretations of democracy, and (3) fail to use strategic instruments effectively, often prioritizing different recipients of democratization support. Democracy promotion is also shaped by a broader foreign policy framework dominated by security and economic interests. In practice, it often takes a backseat to securing stability and market access, regardless of regime type. The link between conflict and democracy is evident in the European neighborhood. In the East, Moldova and Georgia face political instability and Russian pressure, stalling democratic progress. In the South, the Arab Spring led first to some degree of democratization (e.g., Tunisia) but also to intensified authoritarian regression (e.g., Egypt, Libya). Ongoing conflicts frequently overshadow EU democratic aspirations. Scholars highlight the EU's conflicting objectives as it balances democracy promotion with regional stability (Gafuri and Muftuler-Bac, 2022; Grimm, 2015; Richter, 2017). While democracy remains a long-term goal, immediate security concerns often shift priorities toward conflict resolution, sometimes leading to alliances with authoritarian regimes. This trade-off continues to challenge EU external policy. Figure 2 illustrates the link between conflict and governance in the region.

Figure 2. Conflicts and governance in the neighbourhood

Map designed by: Josep Ramon Modol Rates (Lleida University).

Data Sources: <https://bti-project.org/>; <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/index.html#armedconflict>.

Note: The Governance Index is based on the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI). The categorization is derived from the aggregated score for governance. For more info see: <https://bti-project.org/en/methodology>. The number of conflict symbols denote the number of interstate, intrastate, and internationalized intrastate conflicts in a country between 2003-2023 and are based on the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database. For more info see: <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/index.html#armedconflict>.

A second key limitation of democracy promotion is its failure to account for interactions between external and domestic actors and the legitimate preferences of local stakeholders. Scholarship often adopts an ‘outside-in’ view, focusing on external influence while overlooking internal dynamics (Gourevitch, 1978; Leininger, 2010). A more comprehensive approach combines this with an ‘inside-out’ perspective, recognizing domestic attitudes, constraints, and agency in shaping reform efforts. Democracy promotion should be seen as a dynamic process where both external and domestic actors influence political change.

As a third key limitation, authoritarian incumbents have adapted, resisting liberalization and democracy promotion by suppressing opposition, NGOs, and uprisings (Burnell and Schlumberger, 2010; Gershman and Allen, 2006). European democracy promotion lacks effective strategies to counter this growing authoritarian resilience.

Finally, the rise of authoritarian powers weakens European democracy promoters and facilitates authoritarian spread (Ambrosio, 2010; Brownlee, 2007; Burnell, 2006). These

regimes offer economic, military, and diplomatic support, reducing autocracies' reliance on democratic influence (Levitsky and Way, 2006). Key players include Russia and China.

5 EMBRACE research findings

The findings of EMBRACE reinforce key concerns about EU democracy promotion. Without a clear definition of democracy, its effectiveness and alignment with stated goals remain uncertain. Solander (2025) shows that while EU democracy aid positively impacts various forms of democracy, it does not support liberal democracy, revealing a gap between EU objectives and actual outcomes. Moreover, EU membership prospects—once considered the most effective democracy promotion tool—appear to have a negative impact, challenging previous assumptions. Shyrokykh and Solander (2025) also suggests that EU democracy promotion is constrained by self-interest, particularly in areas like energy security and migration. The authors highlight inconsistencies in the EU's application of democracy promotion, which could undermine its credibility and effectiveness. Additionally, internal factors influence the success of EU democracy promotion tools. Biedermann, Grimm and Shyrokykh (manuscript under review)¹ indicate that state capacity affects aid effectiveness, while the findings of Solander (manuscript under review) suggest that corruption weakens the impact of democracy promotion, especially accession conditionality. EMBRACE also highlights the role of EU leverage considering autocratic actors (Solander et al. manuscript under review) and how levels of democracy within the EU itself could potentially damage its credibility and ultimately its democracy promoting tools (Solander manuscript under review).

6 Policy recommendations

The 20th anniversary of the ENP offers an opportunity to reassess these dynamics and reflect on how the EU can adapt its approach to supporting democratic resilience and sustainable governance in its neighbourhood. We suggest four recommendations:

-  **A strategic, coordinated approach among European democracy promoters is essential.** First, democracy promoters must recognize existing conflicts of objectives and take proactive steps to address them rather than passively waiting for outcomes to unfold. A coordinated and strategic approach among European democracy promoters is more necessary than ever. Despite ongoing efforts, key actors—including the European Commission, EU member state governments, development agencies, and regional organizations like the European Council and OSCE—often fail to present a united front in their democratization efforts. While some level of competition among democracy promoters can be beneficial, excessive divergence risks weakening their collective influence.

¹ 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.

 Recognize democracy promotion as a dynamic external-domestic interaction.

Second, democracy promotion should be understood as a dynamic process of external–domestic interaction, where both sides wield influence over reform outcomes. External actors can provide financial and technical support to build institutions and strengthen governance, but the success of democratic reforms ultimately depends on domestic actors, who are responsible for implementing and enforcing new rules. Without genuine cooperation and mutual respect, democratization efforts will struggle to take root.

 Not all domestic resistance opposes democratization.

Third, democracy promoters should not interpret all domestic resistance as opposition to democratization. Domestic actors have legitimate interests that may not contradict democratization but instead reflect different priorities, timeframes, and strategies. These actors must navigate domestic pressures, including public opinion and competing interests. Democracy promoters should not be surprised when domestic actors take participatory decision-making seriously, even when it leads to divergence from external expectations. The more empowered domestic actors become, the more they will assert independence from external reform demands.

 Counter domestic authoritarian pushback and external autocratic influence.

Finally, European democracy promoters must find ways to counter both domestic authoritarian pushback and external autocratic influence in transitioning countries. This remains one of the most pressing and complex challenges. While solutions are not easily found, democracy promoters can take key steps: exposing authoritarian tactics, demonstrating the tangible benefits of democracy, supporting countries through unstable transition phases, and offering stronger financial, technical, and political incentives than authoritarian counterparts. Crucially, these offers must be credible and free from overt economic and security interests that undermine their legitimacy.

The anniversary of the ENP is not just a time to reflect but also a call to action to reinforce the EU’s commitment to democratic values, ensuring that these neighbouring countries have the support they need to navigate the difficult road to democratic consolidation and sustainable governance.

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