



EMBRACE



Synthesis Report:

Comparative findings on EU democracy promotion

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Institutional acronyms

Participant organisation	Country
Berghof Foundation Operations gGmbH (Berghof) (Coordinator)	Germany (DE)
Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg (JMU) (Co-Coordinator)	Germany (DE)
ARI Centre pour une initiative Arabe de Réforme (ARI)	France (FR)
concentris research management GmbH (concentris)	Germany (DE)
Elliniko Idryma Evropaikis kai Exoterikis Politikis (Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy) (ELIAMEP)	Greece (EL)
Iliia State University (ILIAUNI)	Georgia (GE)
PalThink for Strategic Studies (PalThink)	Palestine
Stockholms Universitet (SU)	Sweden (SE)
Ukrainska Asociaciya Evropeyskih Studiy (UESA)	Ukraine (UA)
Universidad de Lleida (UdL)	Spain (ES)
Universiteit Gent (UGent)	Belgium (BE)
Universiteit Maastricht (UM)	Netherlands (NL)
University of Manchester (UMAN)	United Kingdom (UK)
Univerzitet u Beogradu – Fakultet Politickih Nauka (FPN)	Serbia (RS)

Introduction to the EMBRACE project

The EMBRACE research project (2022-25) collects evidence-based knowledge on the obstacles to democratisation and ways to overcome them in five regions of the European neighbourhood: Southern Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, Middle East and North Africa. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and pro-democracy forces to develop effective strategies to promote democratic progress in the European neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, new policy tools for EUDP practitioners and pro-democracy activists are developed based on the project's findings. The EMBRACE consortium consists of 14 partner organisations based in 13 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development.

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

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

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Executive Summary

Purpose: The *Comparative Synthesis Paper (D2.3)* at hand summarizes the main findings of the “EMBRACE: EMBRACing changeE - Overcoming Obstacles and Advancing Democracy in the European Neighbourhood” project funded as Horizon Europe consortium under Grant Agreement 101060809.

Design: EMBRACE started its investigation in the domestic political arena of the countries located in the European Neighbourhood (that are: 23 neighbours in total observed in a quantitative study (**WP3**) and 12 selected countries investigated through qualitative methodology (e.g. semi-structured interviews, ethnographic interviews, observation, background conversations, stakeholder committees, focus group discussions) (**WP4-7**)) in the period 2022 until 2025. EMBRACE focused on domestic political developments, the European Union’s democracy promotion (EUDP) therein and the activities of geopolitical rivals to the EU (such as Russia and China). The EU aims for supporting democratization in the neighbourhood, however, despite intensive efforts, de-democratization and autocratization is more likely to be observed.

Theoretical innovation: EMBRACE explains these trajectories with a set of factors turning into obstacles as barriers that negatively affect EUDP while facilitators enable EUDP and thereby positively influence democratization. EMBRACE identifies three dimensions of factors (that are: institutions, actors and structures) at three levels (that are: domestic, EU and geopolitical levels). EMBRACE hypothesizes: EUDP succeeds or fails depending on how institutional, actor-related and structural factors align across domestic, regional, and international levels. Persistent obstacles such as authoritarian entrenchments, EU internal divisions, or geopolitical competition often outweigh facilitators.

Empirical innovation: EMBRACE builds on a multi-method and multi-disciplinary approach integrating quantitative and qualitative methodology of social science inquiry as well as local perspectives.

Based on the study of 21 episodes of contention in nine countries, **WP4** investigates small-scale gains after political uprisings and identifies multiple interrelated obstacles: organized actors who are channeled into limited, procedural form of participation, civil society actors making ad-hoc concessions or are co-opted from the incumbent regime while a drive for order and stability maintains the status quo and citizens lose their faith in democracy.

WP5 dived deeper into the behaviour of entrenched hegemonic elites in five authoritarian and hybrid regimes across the neighbourhood and investigated their strategies of repression, co-optation and the use of ideological narratives that legitimize the status quo. Hence, WP5 identified the “autocratic toolkit” that enables rulers to maintain power and block democratization.

With a special focus on post-conflict contexts, **WP6** argues that obstacles can even become institutionalized, systematically blocking peace and democracy in post-conflict contexts.

WP7 hints to geopolitical rivals to the EU such as Russia and China. They further obstruct democratization and democracy promotion through instruments such as subversion, co-optation, economic engagement or violent aggression to foster domestic demand for non-EU influence, delegitimize pro-Western governance, or create dependencies exploitable for coercion.

Obstacles and facilitators: Hence, at all levels and in all dimensions, EMBRACE identifies potential obstacles that limit the effectiveness of EUDP (**WP3**). Not all can be turned into facilitators from the outside, particularly because the EU in EMBRACE's analysis also shows indication for the persistence of obstacles. To name but a few: a selective approach to “more-for-more” conditionality that rewards foremost strategically important neighbours; the support of human rights in some cases (e.g. Ukraine), but not in others (e.g. Gaza); the representation of populist or right-wing political parties in the EP which weakens the EU's normative consistency; the democratic backsliding in some of the member states. These internal obstacles limit EUDP effectiveness and reduce the credibility of the EU as a reliable democracy-promoting actor.

EUDP effects are muted or even regressive when...

-  the EU employs a stability-first-logic;
-  the EU is oriented on the gains of internally disagreeing political parties;
-  the EU's engagement remains elite-centric and civic space remains closed; and
-  authoritarian counter-leverage prevails unobstructed by geopolitical EU initiatives.

EUDP most reliably produces incremental, durable gains when...

-  there is an EU internal consensus about the priority of democratization;
-  bottom-up support is sustained, timed to political openings and coupled with bridges to institutional access for civil society; and
-  leverage is sharpened through targeted conditionality and pressure that are timely and credibly implemented.

1. Introduction

As a product of **WP2**, the *Comparative Synthesis Paper (D2.3)* summarizes the main findings of the “EMBRACE: EMBRACing change - Overcoming Obstacles and Advancing Democracy in the European Neighbourhood” project funded as Horizon Europe consortium under Grant Agreement 101060809. It sums up the findings of EMBRACE’s theory-driven empirical work (**WP2-7**) on European Union democracy promotion (EUDP) towards the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood, highlights commonalities and differences among different scholarly perspectives, theorizes them, and formulates recommendations for how the European Union (EU) could further improve its democracy promotion policy towards the European Neighbourhood.

Over the last three years (starting in October 2022 and ending in September 2025), EMBRACE has studied political regime trajectories and episodes of contention within 23 countries located in the European neighbourhood and the European Union’s democracy promotion (EUDP) policies towards these countries. It has done so through a quantitative assessment of democracy promotion instruments and their impact on levels of democracy as well as the factors that constrain the effectiveness of EU democracy promotion (**WP3**). Project partners have qualitatively dived deeper into 12 selected countries to study episodes of political uprisings and the small-scale political gains afterwards (**WP4**), the behaviour of blockage elites in hybrid and autocratic regimes (**WP5**), blockages to peace and democracy in post-conflict countries (**WP6**), and the geopolitical context in which the EU seeks cooperation with the neighbourhood (**WP7**). In their field work, EMBRACE partners conducted over 200 semi-structured or ethnographic interviews, organized two times stakeholder committee meetings for each of the six selected countries and in Brussels, and had numerous background conversations with policy-makers and activists on the ground. During the entire duration of the project, the partners closely observed the political situation in five different sub-regions of the neighbourhood, that is Eastern Europe, the Southern Caucasus, the Western Balkans, the Middle East and Northern Africa. The findings have been constantly discussed among the research teams contributing to a respective work package and with all project partners during the general assembly meetings of the entire consortium. The project partners have supported each other to critically reflect, validate and/or cross-check results. EMBRACE’s empirical findings informed the development of three new tools (**WP8**) and a dataset as empirical resource (**WP3**).

This *Comparative Synthesis Paper (D2.3)* has been compiled by the team of the scientific lead of EMBRACE, JMU. It builds on an impressive list of EMBRACE-funded deliverables and publications (as listed below in the reference list). The synthesis is based on EMBRACE’s theoretical approach as detailed in the *Theory Framework Paper (D2.2, submitted to the EU in month 8 of the project)* and the project’s *Combined Methodology and Field Work Plan (D2.5, submitted to the EU in month 10 of the project)*. It references exclusively EMBRACE publications including all official deliverables (cited using the format of [D[WP

number].[deliverable number]) as well as further working papers, policy briefs, journal articles, scholarly work and reports from field work (sorted along the work packages in which they were produced, and numbered consecutively using the format [#WP number].[product number]). Overall, in the course of the project the EMBRACE partners have produced 32 deliverables, a series of eleven policy briefs, a series of five working papers, a journal special issue in *Frontiers in Political Science* with five scholarly articles, a journal special issue in *Democratization* with three contributions from EMBRACE partners, additionally 19 academic articles (among 13 are already published open access and six are under review at the time of writing), one joint paper with the sister project REDEMOS, one book monograph (in print at Oxford University Press) and one edited volume (under contract at Routledge) in which the findings from all EMBRACE WPs will be presented.

The *Comparative Synthesis Paper (D2.3)* follows in its structures the three main research questions and their sub-questions as developed in the project's *Theory Framework Paper (D2.2, Box 1, p. 9-10, and Section 12, p. 104-107)*. Hypotheses for RQ1 and 2 have been developed when preparing the *Theory Framework Paper (D2.2, Section 12)* in early-2023. Hypotheses for RQ3 have been prepared for and presented at the findings conference of EMBRACE at JMU Würzburg in July 2024. In the remainder of this paper, Section 2 describes the activities of EMBRACE. Section 3 systematizes the obstacles to democratization and democracy promotion (research question, RQ 1). Section 4 studies the pathways occasionally enabling to overcome these obstacles (RQ 2). Section 5 formulates recommendations on how the EU could better adjust its democracy promotion toolbox (RQ 3). Section 6 concludes.

2. Description of Activities

This Comparative Synthesis Report (D2.3) brings together the findings of three years of collaborative research conducted within the EMBRACE project. Following extensive fieldwork, data collection, and regional partner consultations, the report consolidates the insights of all work packages (WPs) into a unified framework. Its purpose is twofold: to advance theoretical debates on the dynamics of EU democracy promotion (EUDP) and to inform the design of innovative tools capable of overcoming obstacles to democratization and empowering societies to embrace democratic change.

Over the course of the project, the concept originally framed as “blockages” has been further developed and refined into the term “obstacles.” While “blockages” suggested a complete standstill, our three years of research have shown that hindrances to EU democracy promotion (EUDP) are rarely absolute. Instead, they take multiple forms and degrees of severity, ranging from temporary impediments to long-term structural constraints. We therefore use the term “obstacles” to capture this broader spectrum of factors that restrict, delay, or diminish the impact of EUDP. By contrast, we refer to facilitators (or catalysts) as conditions or dynamics that strengthen the Union’s capacity to promote democracy, either

by reinforcing institutional effectiveness, empowering pro-democratic actors, or creating favorable structural contexts. Facilitators thus enable more consistent and credible engagement, ultimately enhancing the prospects for democratic reform.

Throughout this *Comparative Synthesis Paper*, obstacles denote the diverse barriers that undermine the effectiveness of EUDP, whereas facilitators highlight the drivers that enhance its positive contribution to democratization. Together, these categories provide a structured lens for analyzing the conditions under which EU democracy promotion succeeds, falters, or fails.

While the EU has developed a broad set of instruments to promote democracy within its neighbourhood, the effectiveness of these efforts is shaped by a complex interplay of obstacles and facilitators that operate simultaneously at the domestic, EU, and international levels. These factors determine whether democratization gains traction, stalls, or reverses.

Obstacles are forces that block or slow democratic change—such as authoritarian elites, weak institutions, or adverse geopolitical conditions—while facilitators are conditions that make democratic progress more likely, such as strong civil society, accountable governance, or supportive international alignments. Importantly, while a single obstacle rarely prevents democratization outright, clusters of obstacles can create systemic closure. Conversely, when multiple facilitators reinforce one another, they can open meaningful opportunities for reform even under difficult conditions.

The framework distinguishes three dimensions of influence — institutions, actors, and structures — across three levels:

 **Domestic level:** The quality of state institutions (rule of law, electoral systems, checks and balances) is fundamental. Strong institutions underpin accountability and protect rights, while weak or manipulated ones serve ruling elites and entrench authoritarianism. Political actors matter too: democratic elites, opposition parties, civil society, and independent media can drive reform, but autocrats often suppress them or co-opt institutions to maintain control. Structural factors like state capacity, socioeconomic development, societal cohesion, and historical legacies further shape democratization trajectories—either enabling reform or entrenching barriers (D2.2: Grimm and EMBRACE Consortium, 2023; D3.3: Shyrokykh et al., 2025; #2.6: Grimm and Göldner-Ebenthal, 2025; #2.7: Grimm, 2025; #2.16: Grimm and Shyrokykh, 2026).

 **EU level:** The Union’s ability to act effectively depends on its institutional design, decision-making rules, and the constellation of actors involved. Coherent, efficient institutions can enable democracy promotion, but in practice, multiple EU bodies (Commission, Parliament, Council, member states) with overlapping responsibilities often produce bureaucratic inefficiencies and incoherence. Diverging member-state interests—over energy security, migration, or relations with neighbours—further fragment EU policy, undermining its credibility as a democracy promoter. While the EU

has leverage through aid, trade, and accession incentives, this leverage is often weakened by internal disunity and slow adaptation to changing conditions (D2.2: Grimm and EMBRACE Consortium, 2023; D3.3: Shyrokykh et al., 2025; #2.6: Grimm and Göldner-Ebenthal, 2025; #2.7: Grimm, 2025; #2.16: Grimm and Shyrokykh, 2026).

 **International level:** A country's memberships and alliances shape its incentives. International organizations rooted in democratic norms (EU, NATO, Council of Europe) promote reforms by setting standards and offering benefits of integration. Conversely, alignment with authoritarian powers or organizations (e.g. Russia, China, Saudi Arabia) offers protection, alternative resources, and illiberal norms that counterbalance EU influence. Broader structural dynamics—geopolitical conflict, great power rivalry, global energy interdependence—can further constrain EU democracy promotion, shifting priorities away from democratic conditionality toward pragmatic security or economic interests. (D2.2: Grimm and EMBRACE Consortium, 2023; D3.3: Shyrokykh et al., 2025; #2.6: Grimm and Göldner-Ebenthal, 2025; #2.7: Grimm, 2025; #2.16: Grimm and Shyrokykh, 2026).

Table 1 shows how these levels and dimensions relate to one another. In short, EU democracy promotion succeeds or fails depending on how institutional, actor-related, and structural factors align across domestic, regional, and international levels. Persistent obstacles—such as authoritarian entrenchment, EU internal divisions, or geopolitical competition—often outweigh facilitators. Yet where facilitators converge—through strong domestic institutions, supportive elites, and credible EU leverage—democratization can still advance despite external or internal pressures.

Table 1. *Facilitators and obstacles to democratization and democracy promotion*

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

Source: #2.16: Grimm and Shyrokykh, 2026.

In what follows, we outline how the EMBRACE research has addressed the project's main questions and corresponding hypotheses, highlight key comparative insights, and identify lessons for both theory and practice. This synthesis is intended not only to inform academic debates but also to guide policymakers and practitioners seeking to strengthen the EU's role as a credible and effective promoter of democracy in its neighbourhood.

3. What are the obstacles to democratisation that EUDP needs to account for? (RQ 1)

In this section we seek to answer our main research question number 1 based on the sub-questions presented outlined below. Together, they highlight that obstacles to democratisation that EUDP needs to account for, occur on all three levels and dimensions. This ultimately suggests that for EUDP to enhance its effectiveness, all three levels and dimensions need to be accounted for within the EU's democracy promoting strategy.

3.1 What are the EU-internal obstacles that negatively influence EUDP? (WP2 and WP3)

At the offset of EMBRACE, we hypothesized that *competing EU-internal foreign policy goals, the EU's internal rise of authoritarianism and EU internal competition among different EU bodies negatively influences EUDP*. Based on the dataset created in **WP3** (D3.1: Shyrokykh and Grimm, 2025; #2.16: Grimm and Shyrokykh, 2026), multiple quantitative analyses have been conducted to assess the impact of various obstacles to democratization. The findings of **WP2** and **WP3** respectively find support for this hypothesis, outlining numerous instances where obstacles on a EU level stand in the way of EUDP effectiveness.

In **WP2** the concept of obstacles was created. Grimm and Shyrokykh (#2.16: 2026) identify obstacles to EU democracy promotion (EUDP) at the EU-level, where the EU's organs and member states—despite often being perceived externally as a single actor—are marked by divergent interests and limited coherence. These obstacles cluster into three types: actor based, stemming from dysfunctional or anti-reform actor behaviour and the lack of consensus among EU institutions and member states (with Hungary and Poland's democratic backsliding being particularly disruptive); institutional, rooted in complex and inefficient decision-making structures, overlapping responsibilities, and an ENP design still shaped by enlargement logics, which hinder adaptability and innovation; and structural, arising from broader geopolitical and economic contexts where security or material interests often outweigh democracy goals, as exemplified by dependence on Russian energy and shifting global power rivalries. Together, these dynamics slow decision-making, reduce consistency, and undermine the EU's credibility as a promoter of democracy.

Turning to the empirical findings, **WP2** and **WP3** identify various instances of structural obstacles. For example, the research of Solander (#3.9: manuscript under review)

demonstrates that democratic backsliding within EU member states directly undermines the effectiveness of EUDP in the neighbourhood. When the average level of democracy within the Union declines, accession conditionality loses much of its credibility and leverage, as partner countries perceive the EU as inconsistent or even hypocritical in its demands. Conversely, when democracy levels within the EU are higher, accession conditionality becomes more effective, reinforcing the EU's role as a credible and attractive model. These findings underscore a critical insight: the EU's capacity to promote democracy abroad is inseparable from the quality of democracy at home. For the EUDP to function as a persuasive and legitimate instrument, the EU itself and its member states must embody the democratic values it seeks to promote.

Additional potential structural obstacles identified include the diverse interests found within the European Parliament (EP). The EP is indeed a unique actor in the sense that it is the democratic backbone of the EU, allowing citizens to directly elect their representatives. At the same time, it brings together actors that both support and are against further EU integration, with adverse political agendas which could shape the way it promotes democracy. The findings of Solander et al. (#3.7: manuscript under review) suggests that while the European Parliament (EP) broadly engages with the EU's normative agenda of promoting democracy in third countries, this commitment is not uniformly shared across all political groups. In general, the EP issues resolutions that respond to changes in democracy levels in the European neighbourhood, demonstrating alignment with the principles of EUDP. However, this normative engagement is significantly weakened by the behavior of certain party groups—most notably populist and radical right parties (PRRPs). These parties are not associated with supporting democracy-related resolutions unless such actions serve strategic interests, particularly in areas such as migration. This selective engagement reveals a fundamental tension within the EP: while the institution presents itself as a guardian of democratic norms, the influence of populist and radical right parties introduces instrumental and interest-driven approaches that risk undermining the EU's credibility as a consistent promoter of democracy. Ultimately, this suggests that the strength and coherence of EUDP depend not only on institutional mandates but also on the internal composition and normative commitments of the EP's political party groups.

Pertaining to structural blockages, the findings of **WP3** further demonstrate the EU-level factors that could obstruct positive impacts of EU democracy promotion. The findings of Shyrokykh and Solander (#3.11: 2025) demonstrate that while the EU indeed makes use of the “more-for-more” principle of political conditionality, and rewards democratic progress with aid, the EU is more likely to reward governance performance in strategically important neighbours. These strategic interests specifically relate to energy security and migration. This performance-based yet self-interested use of aid risks creating inconsistencies which could ultimately damage the credible use of political conditionality and the image of the EU as a credible democracy promoter.

Finally, **WP2** identifies institutional blockages on an EU-level. The analysis of Grimm (#2.7: 2025) shows that EU policy change within the ENP occurs most visibly in response to crises, where the Union is compelled to adapt quickly, as seen in its response to Russia's war in Ukraine through sanctions, refugee integration measures, and the unprecedented opening of membership prospects for Ukraine and Moldova. While such reactive adjustments highlight the EU's ability to respond to shifting geopolitical realities, long-term and substantial policy changes remain limited and slow to materialize. The most notable shifts have been the gradual expansion of human rights demands—such as the inclusion of LGBTQ+ rights—reflecting the EU's evolving normative agenda which is further exemplified by the findings of Grimm et al. (#3.4: 2025). Broader structural changes to the ENP are rare, with significant adjustments usually triggered by geopolitical upheavals like the Arab Spring or Russia's aggression. Overall, sustained transformation tends to be incremental, context-specific, and often confined to individual partner countries through targeted support for socio-economic development, institution-building, and civil society, rather than sweeping region-wide reforms.

Overall, the findings of **WP2** and **WP3** point to a range of EU-level obstacles that risk undermining the Union's democracy promotion efforts in its neighbourhood (for more information see D3.2: Shyrokykh et al., 2025).

3.2 What are the specific patterns of actor-centered, institutional and/or structural obstacles that emerge in defective democracies, in authoritarian and hybrid regimes, and in post-conflict consociational regimes (WP4, WP5 and WP7)?

We initially hypothesized that *constellations of obstacles differ according to the political regime, the actors involved and the structural context in which they emerge. Political deadlock in the context of uprisings in democratising regimes is different from political deadlock in deeply entrenched authoritarian regimes or in post-war countries that seek to build peace.* **WP4**, **WP5** and **WP7** present multiple findings in relation to such obstacles.

The findings of **WP4** highlight multiple interrelated obstacles to democratization. Actor-centered obstacles emerge when organized actors of change are channeled into limited, procedural forms of participation or when international actors' influence is constrained by shifting domestic power dynamics, reducing substantive engagement with social movements and grassroots demands (D4.3: Rennick and Žilović, 2025; #4.6: Jmal, 2025; #4.8: Armakolas and Krstinovska, 2025; #4.9: Rennick et al., 2026). Institutional obstacles arise as actors seek insider status, adapting to procedural logics and ad-hoc concessions that strengthen transitional authorities while neutralizing large-scale contestation, ultimately undermining citizens' faith in democracy and limiting long-term integration of marginalized groups (D4.3:

Rennick and Žilović, 2025; #4.4: Aprasidze, 2025; #4.8: Armakolas and Krstinovska, 2025; #4.9: Rennick et al., 2026). Structural obstacles include persistent insider–outsider divisions, continuity in political-economic arrangements, and the “stability-change paradox,” where the drive for order during transitions constrains deep structural reforms and preserves pre-existing inequalities (D4.3: Rennick and Žilović, 2025; #4.8: Armakolas and Krstinovska, 2025; #4.9: Rennick et al., 2026). Together, these actor-centered, institutional, and structural dynamics reveal how short-term strategies to maintain stability and manage dissent can inadvertently weaken democratic consolidation and leave transitions vulnerable to future reversals.

These obstacles were further analysed in **WP5** on authoritarian and hybrid regimes. Bosse et al. (D5.3: Bosse et al., 2024) identify entrenched hegemonic elites as central obstacles to democratisation. In authoritarian regimes like Azerbaijan and Belarus, **institutional capture** (rigged elections, politically controlled courts, restrictive NGO laws), actor-centred obstacles (elite repression, co-optation of civil society, nationalist legitimisation), and structural shields (oil rents, Russian subsidies and security guarantees) converge into durable closure. Bosse et al. (D5.3: Bosse et al., 2024), show that regimes deploy an autocratic toolkit: façade democracy through manipulated elections and parliaments, the selective licensing and funding of regime-aligned NGOs, provision of social goods to reinforce legitimacy, and targeted repression including surveillance, violence, and judicial harassment. In Azerbaijan, Aliyev’s “authoritarian technocracy” combines this toolkit with EU energy deals, while replacing older elites with younger technocrats loyal to the regime; in Belarus, the fraudulent 2020 elections sparked unprecedented mass protests and the creation of exile institutions, but large-scale repression and Moscow’s economic and military backing quickly restored closure (#5.7: Abdallah et al., 2026; D5.1: Bosse et al., 2025). Hybrid regimes operate differently: institutions exist but are hollowed. In Serbia, Vučić’s regime relies on manipulated media and elections (institutional), patronage networks and selective repression of protest movements (actor), and consistent EU prioritisation of stability and enlargement over democracy (structural), though environmental protests in the Jadar valley briefly mobilised a cross-class coalition that united urban activists with rural communities (#5.7: Abdallah et al., 2026; D5.1: Bosse et al., 2025). Lebanon’s 2019 uprising revealed the same pattern: an institutional void marked by paralysed state bodies, entrenched sectarian elite dominance, and international donor dependency that channelled resources through existing power networks, thereby neutralising reform (#5.7: Abdallah et al., 2026; D5.1: Bosse et al., 2025; D2.4: Susanna i López, 2025). Across cases, fleeting openings collapse unless protest movements and civic coalitions broaden beyond narrow urban elites, small institutional footholds such as local councils or exile structures are protected from capture, and external actors align democracy support with the domestic pressures, such as mass protests, civic mobilisation, and social grievances over corruption, inequality, or poor services, that challenge authoritarian elites rather than prioritising energy or security interests.

WP6 focused on patterns in post-conflict regimes. Pogodda and Richmond (D6.1: 2024) argue that fragmented civil society can block peace and democratization, as divisions, co-optation, and NGO competition weaken collective action and allow regimes to adapt and marginalize opposition. For instance, the Minsk negotiation process (2014–2021) revealed that direct inclusion of civil society in peace talks can be manipulated by conflict parties and may fail to empower participants, particularly in interstate wars like Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (#6.7: Kyselova, 2025). Civil society can only be meaningfully included in negotiations if organizations have genuine freedom to operate, and international actors should therefore consider these conditions rather than uncritically pushing for inclusion (#6.6: Kyselova, 2023). Additional blockages arise from elite bargains, societal disinterest in peace, revisionist political networks, and unreformed security agencies that bolster authoritarian power. Other actors, such as the Orthodox Church in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, further entrench divisions by legitimizing war and undermining democratic and peace efforts (D6.1: Pogodda and Richmond, 2024). Richmond et al. (D6.3: 2024) describe “counter-peace” strategies as institutional blockages that obstruct, derail, or reverse democratization in post-conflict states. These strategies preserve existing hierarchies through watered-down reforms, flawed power-sharing, or violent quasi-states, sometimes escalating into coercive dictatorships when backed by external support (See also #6.4: Pogodda et al., 2023; #6.5: Richmond et al., 2024). For example, Luciani and Shevtsova (#6.9: 2024) highlight how major security crises produce divergent and context-specific outcomes for anti-genderism and political homophobia. Yet, the EU itself can further stand in the way of its own promotion of democracy and stability following conflict. For example, following Azerbaijan’s retaking of Nagorno-Karabakh, the EU pursued a more geopolitical engagement in Armenia and the South Caucasus, emphasizing connectivity and regional influence, often at the expense of local communities’ security (#6.8: Luciani, 2025).

These findings substantiate the hypothesis that political deadlock and democratization obstacles differ depending on regime type, actor constellations, and structural context. In democratizing states, procedural and structural bottlenecks limit the durability of reform; in authoritarian regimes, entrenched elites and institutional manipulation systematically block democratization; in post-conflict settings, fragile civil society and elite bargains create highly contested environments for reform. The implications for EUDP are significant: strategies must be context-sensitive, tailored to regime type, and attentive to actor dynamics and structural constraints. Standardized approaches risk ineffectiveness or even reinforcing existing power asymmetries. To enhance impact, the EU should combine long-term institutional support, adaptive engagement with domestic and civil society actors, and careful calibration of geopolitical and economic incentives to strengthen local ownership of democratic processes.

3.3 What are the specific patterns of obstacles to EUDP that emerge in the geopolitical and geo-economic competition between major powers (at national, regional or global level) who are rivals of EUDP (WP7)?

EMBRACE hypothesized that *Russia in the Eastern neighbourhood and Saudi Arabia in the Southern neighbourhood rival EUDP through backing anti-democratic forces politically in the domestic political arena of the EU neighbours; China reduces EU leverage through its economically-driven foreign policy in all regions.*

On this macro level, the findings of **WP7** demonstrate that the effectiveness of EUDP in the European neighbourhood suffers from geopolitical and geo-economic obstacles that emerge from competition of the EU with other major powers, especially Russia, Saudi Arabia and China. Armakolas et al. (#7.10: Armakolas et al., 2026; D7.2: Armakolas et al., 2025) argue that the intensity of a country's ties with external actors—whether pro-democratic, like the EU, or authoritarian—depends on domestic factors such as elite preferences, historical legacies, socio-cultural affinities, and perceived economic benefits. How domestic actors perceive the influence of pro-democratic partners shapes their strategic choices, including whether to resist or accommodate democracy promotion. Authoritarian actors often employ instruments such as subversion, co-optation, and economic engagement to foster domestic demand for non-EU influence, delegitimize pro-Western governance, or create dependencies exploitable for coercion. Conversely, the extent and quality of a country's engagement with external rivals also shapes the EU's willingness and capacity to deepen pro-democratic ties (D7.1: Bechev et al., 2025).

Russia represents the most acute geopolitical challenger to democratization in the Eastern neighbourhood, interfering as a blocking actor within its traditional sphere of influence. Ukraine serves as a primary example of this where military aggression, political manipulation such as illegitimate past “referendums” and demographic engineering as well as hybrid warfare undermines the political trajectory of Ukraine (#7.11: Petrov et al., 2026; #7.6: Petrov, 2025). Pogodda and Richmond (D6.1: 2024) show that Putin's authoritarian, oligarchic regime, incompatible with EU law-focused systems, led Russia to construct a “Eurasian” integration model as a spoiler to undermine Western influence. As former Soviet states pursued EU integration, the Kremlin responded with aggressive foreign policies, hybrid warfare, and support for pro-Russian elites to destabilize democratisation efforts, exemplified by the partitioning of Ukraine and control over Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, and parts of Donbas. In post-Soviet states like Armenia, elites often balance security dependence on Russia with selective EU economic engagement, highlighting the pragmatic constraints on democratization (#6.10: Luntumbue and Luciani, 2024). Ideologically, Russia counters liberal democratic values with a focus on orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationalism, leveraging institutions like the Russian Orthodox Church and anti-LGBTQ policies to reinforce authoritarian narratives and legitimize aggression (#7.7: Petrov, 2024; #6.9: Luciani and

Shevtsova, 2024; #2.18: Hülzer et al., 2026). Through these strategies—military, economic, and ideological—Russia actively blocks democratization in its neighbourhood and undermines EU influence. Russia has also actively interfered in the vote, including vote-buying, illegal campaign financing, voter transport, and attempts to infiltrate OSCE election observers in Moldova (#6.2: Bochsler, 2025), contributing to institutional blockages.

EMBRACE further identifies Saudi Arabia as a geopolitical actor that can both provide obstacles and enabling factors to EUDP. Richmond et al. (D6.3: 2024) show that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States form part of a network of revisionist powers, led by China and Russia, which prioritize stability over human rights and resist international pressure for democratization. These states support other authoritarian regimes through military, diplomatic, and economic assistance, rejecting Western liberal norms as external interference (#7.8: Shaban, 2025). In Palestine, the Gulf states play an ambivalent role: while backing Hamas, they also recognize the need for Palestinian statehood and institutional development, with Saudi Arabia advocating for full sovereignty as a condition for normalizing ties with Israel. This dual approach positions the Gulf as both a blocker and a potential enabler of democratic development (#7.8: Shaban, 2025; #7.12: Grigoriadis and Bourhnane, 2025).

Finally, China acts as a significant counterweight to EU democracy promotion (EUDP) in the European neighbourhood. Richmond (#6.5: 2024) shows that China opposes the liberal peace order, supports authoritarian regimes, and prioritizes stability over human rights, aiming to create alternative regional orders and institutions that rival Western-led frameworks. Economically, China expands influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road, as seen in Georgia and the South Caucasus, offering investment and support without democratic conditionality, thereby reducing EU leverage (#7.4: Aprasidze and Gvalia, 2025). Unlike Russia, which employs coercion and subversion to directly challenge EU influence, China's strategy primarily uses economic co-optation to indirectly undermine domestic reforms and EU accession processes (#7.10: Armakolas et al., 2026; D7.2: Armakolas et al., 2025). The effectiveness of such influence is amplified in target countries with weak institutions, polarized societies, or authoritarian tendencies, and is further enhanced when the EU compromises its democracy-promotion goals for short-term strategic interests.

However, it is important to acknowledge that public opinion can also shape these patterns. As previously acknowledged, neighbourhood domestic elites in particular play a decisive role in shaping the direction of foreign alignment and determining the success or failure of both the EU's and rivals' influence projects. It is however also important to acknowledge that this is furthermore made easier by matching public attitudes. Higher popular demand for influence by EU's competitors makes it much easier for political elites to question the primacy of dictates coming from Europe and to build resilience to their regime by increasing recourse to the influence from authoritarian rivals (#7.2: Armakolas et al., 2025; #7.10: Armakolas et al., 2026).

The findings of EMBRACE confirm that the effectiveness of EU democracy promotion (EUDP) in the European neighbourhood is significantly constrained by geopolitical and geo-economic competition from major powers. Russia emerges as the most acute blocking actor in the Eastern neighbourhood, using hybrid warfare, support for pro-Russian elites, and ideological tools such as nationalism, the Orthodox Church, and anti-LGBTQ policies to destabilize democratization and counter EU influence, as exemplified by Ukraine, Crimea, and the Donbas (D6.1: Pogodda and Richmond, 2024; #7.6: Petrov, 2024; #6.9: Luciani and Shevtsova, 2024). Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, meanwhile, form part of a revisionist network with Russia and China, supporting authoritarian regimes and resisting Western liberal norms, while simultaneously enabling democratic development in selective cases, such as Palestinian statehood initiatives, reflecting their ambivalent role (D6.3: Richmond et al., 2024; #7.8: Shaban, 2025). China acts as a strategic economic counterweight, expanding influence through investment and co-optation without democratic conditionality, for example in Georgia and the South Caucasus, thereby undermining EU leverage and indirectly hindering domestic reforms (#7.4: Aprasidze and Gvalia, 2025; #7.10: Armakolas et al., 2026; D7.2: Armakolas et al., 2025). Across regions, the impact of these external actors is mediated by domestic conditions—elite preferences, historical legacies, societal polarization, and institutional capacity—which shape whether pro-democratic efforts are resisted or accommodated. Overall, these findings underscore that EUDP's success depends not only on EU resources and incentives but also on the complex interplay of external rivalries, domestic politics, and the strategic agency of authoritarian actors.

3.4 How do obstacles influence the effectiveness of EUDP? In which patterns of obstacles is EUDP more, or less, effective? (WP3)

When preparing the EMBRACE proposal, we hypothesized that: *All types of obstacles negatively influence the effectiveness of EUDP.* As described in the beginning of this report, obstacles and facilitators shape democratization by either blocking or enabling reform, with clusters of obstacles creating systemic closure and reinforcing facilitators opening meaningful opportunities even under difficult conditions. At the domestic level, strong institutions, accountable elites, vibrant civil society, and cohesive societies promote reform, while weak or manipulated institutions, autocratic actors, and adverse structural conditions entrench authoritarianism. At the EU level, effective democracy promotion depends on coherent institutions and coordinated action among the Commission, Parliament, Council, and member states, but overlapping responsibilities, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and diverging national interests often weaken its credibility and slow adaptation. Internationally, alignment with democratic organizations (EU, NATO, Council of Europe) incentivizes reform through standards and integration benefits, whereas ties to authoritarian powers (Russia, China, Saudi Arabia) provide alternative resources, illiberal norms, and protection, with broader

geopolitical and economic dynamics further constraining EU democracy promotion.¹ While the EU has several tools within its EUDP tool kit that can be utilized to promote democracy (see for example: #2.15: Grimm et al., 2026; #2.11: Grimm, 2023), obstacles risk hindering their effectiveness in the European neighbourhood.

Turning to the countries within the European neighbourhood, multiple institutional and structural obstacles are identified. For example, Biedermann et al. (#3.5: manuscript under review; #3.12: Biedermann and Köster, 2026) finds that the effectiveness of EU aid is conditional upon state capacity. More specifically, states with established administrative systems and well-functioning institutions can facilitate the positive effects of democracy assistance funds, ensuring their effective implementation. Without such capacity, democracy assistance can become a burden and will not achieve its initial intent. Similar findings are demonstrated by Solander (#3.10: manuscript under review) which identifies corruption as a structural obstacle that mediates the impact of EUDP in neighbouring countries. On an institutional level, fragmented civil society is identified as a major obstacle to democratization and peace in countries like Algeria, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon, and Tunisia, mass mobilizations initially led to brief opportunities for social and political transformation. However, subsequent divisions within civil society have undermined efforts to democratize (D6.1: Pogodda and Richmond, 2024). In other countries, such as Belarus, legal frameworks governing civil society organisations constitute another significant institutional blockage. Before 2020, there was a relatively "open" environment for Belarusian NGOs, but this civil space has since been almost completely closed (#5.7: Abdallah et al., 2026; D5.1: Bosse et al., 2025). Similar trends are observed in Algeria where mass mobilization has been contained by segmented authoritarian governance (#5.8: Boubekeur, 2025).

On an actor level, multiple neighbourhood countries face obstacles created by domestic actors. In Serbia, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has gradually consolidated control over the electoral process, resulting in what many observers describe as increasingly unfair electoral conditions (#5.7: Abdallah et al., 2026; D5.1: Bosse et al., 2025). In Belarus, President Alexander Lukashenka's regime has systematically suppressed opposition and independent voices, particularly following the 2020 protests and a fast-paced intensification of repression by the regime (#5.7: Abdallah et al., 2026; D5.1: Bosse et al., 2025). In Lebanon, an intricate sectarian power-sharing system entrenches actor-level blockages. Dozens of sectarian parties, each tied to clientelist networks, fragment political authority while sustaining elite dominance over society (#5.7: Abdallah et al., 2026; D5.1: Bosse et al., 2025; #2.17: Susanna i López, 2026). This is further exemplified through the case of Azerbaijan and President Aliyev's promotion of "authoritarian technocracy" after 2019—replacing the "old guard" with technocrats—was framed as modernisation, reinforcing a narrative of competent rule (#5.7:

¹ For a more detailed description of obstacles and blockages. Please see: #2.16: Grimm and Shyrokykh, 2026; #2.14: Grimm et al., 2026; #2.18: Grimm et al., 2026; D3.3: Shyrokykh et al., 2025; #2.11: Grimm, 2023; and #2.12: Grimm, 2023; #2.13: Grimm, 2023.

Abdallah et al., 2026; D5.1: Bosse et al., 2025) and Algeria's post-Hirak trajectory where certain opposition voices are permitted within controlled participatory spaces, whereas dissenting actors are consistently excluded or even criminalized (#5.8: Boubekour, 2025).

WP3 further identifies multiple EU-level factors (as detailed in section 3.1). Structural obstacles include the European Parliament's heterogeneous composition: although it broadly supports democracy promotion, populist and radical right parties selectively engage only when aligned with strategic interests, weakening the EU's normative consistency (#3.7: Solander et al, manuscript under review). Similarly, the EU's "more-for-more" conditionality is often applied selectively, rewarding democratic performance primarily in strategically important neighbours, such as those relevant to energy security or migration, creating inconsistencies that further risk undermining the EU's credibility as a democracy promoter (#3.11: Shyrokykh and Solander, 2025). Such inconsistencies are exemplified through the case of Azerbaijan, whereby the EU's 2022 gas deal with Azerbaijan provided legitimacy to the regime, ultimately prioritizing energy security over democracy and highlighting how conjunctural terrain can be shaped by political bargains (#5.7: Abdallah et al., 2026; D5.1: Bosse et al., 2025). This further aligns with the findings of Pogodda and Richmond (D6.1: 2024) that also acknowledge an inconsistent use of EUDP, acknowledging that the EU is commonly regarded as inconsistent or even hypocritical, supporting human rights robustly in some cases (e.g., Ukraine) with military, financial, and diplomatic tools, while relying mostly on rhetoric, humanitarian aid, or economic interests in others (e.g., Gaza, Nagorno-Karabakh). This not only risks damaging the leverage, credibility and image of the EU but also provides an opening for non-EU powers to undermine the EU's influence and eventually outcompete its democracy promotion (#7.10: Armakolas et al., 2026; D7.2: Armakolas et al., 2025). In addition, discrepancies can be found between member states which could stall EU engagement in promoting democracy and peace. This is prominent in the case of Palestine where humanitarian and democratic commitments are undermined by the constraints of internal divisions among member states (#7.12: Grigoriadis and Bourhnane, 2025). Finally, levels of democracy within the EU and its member states itself risk becoming an obstacle, demonstrating that internal democratic divergences could hinder the effectiveness of EUDP (#3.9: Solander, manuscript under review). Besides this, EMBRACE highlights the EU's bureaucratic inefficiency and focus on short-term over sustainable change (#2.7: Grimm, manuscript under review), exemplified by its slow, limited response to Belarus (D5.2: Bosse et al., 2025; #5.4: 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 (#2.18: Hülzer et al., 2026).

In summary, the findings of EMBRACE demonstrate that multiple obstacles can hinder the effectiveness of EUDP. Country-specific examples of these obstacles are outlined in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Examples of country-specific obstacles in hybrid and authoritarian states of the European neighbourhood

	Institutional blockages	Actor blockages	Structural blockages
Algeria	Segmented authoritarian governance, fragmented administration, selective media access	Selective co-optation, resistance of EU conditionality, clientelist networks, technocratic elites	Strategic use of geopolitical relations, economic segmentation, nationalist narratives
Azerbaijan	Rigged elections, captured courts, repressive legal framework	Elite repression, co-optation of NGOs, elite monopolization	Oil rents, nationalist discourse, geopolitical indulgence
Belarus	Fraudulent elections, closed civil space, crackdown on NGOs	Repression, regime control of information, exile of opposition	Russian influence, geopolitical isolation
Lebanon	Fragmented sectarian institutions, lack of checks and balances	Elite capture, divided opposition, co-optation of civil society	Aid dependency, sectarianism, geopolitical neglect
Serbia	Manipulated elections, weak rule of law, monopolized media	Elite personalization, repression, divide-and-rule	Economic consolidation, geopolitical ambivalence

Source: **WP5** country reports.

4. How and under what conditions can the obstacles to democratisation be overcome and how can EUDP contribute to creating conditions that are conducive to this process? (RQ 2)

The second main research question that EMBRACE has sought to address concerns under which conditions obstacles to democratisation can be overcome and how EUDP can contribute to creating favourable conditions for overcoming obstacles. In this section, we address the research questions pertaining to this overarching research question.

4.1 How and under what conditions can the EU make use of the variety of EUDP instruments to increase its leverage on resilient authoritarian incumbents and support to pro-democratic actors to advance democratisation (WP 2-8)?

Within EMBRACE, we hypothesized that *The EU needs to overcome EU-internal obstacles and develop a more pro-active foreign policy strategy prioritizing democratisation support to the*

outside. Our findings suggest that by acting as a coherent and consistent democracy promoting actor, the EU can enhance its credibility and leverage in the European neighbourhood. It would signal being a partner particularly for pro-democracy actors offering a viable alternative to authoritarian rivals and their anti-democratic norms.

The EU is a context-sensitive actor and has evolved its concept of democracy and democracy promotion throughout the years to align with diverging neighbourhood contexts (#3.4: Grimm et al., 2025). But such context-sensitivity could also signal a lack of consistency when engaging with neighbourhood countries. As Shyrokykh et al. (D3.3: 2025) acknowledge, the EU lacks a uniform definition of democracy, which ultimately leaves the understanding of democracy to the eyes of the beholder. Solander (#3.8: 2025) attributes this lack of democracy definition to the association of EU-provided aid with various types of democracy (e.g. electoral, egalitarian, participatory and deliberative democracy). However, the findings show no association between EU aid and liberal democracy, ultimately suggesting that EUDP through aid is effective in enticing democratization in various types of democracy, but not liberal democracy. Thus, a more coherent understanding of democracy within the EU itself could provide more clarity into the EUDP strategy and what the EU actually seeks to promote.

A second internal obstacle pertains to the varying self-interests within the EU (ranging from member states and institutional bodies). The findings of EMBRACE highlight numerous instances of EUDP being constrained by self-interest. Shyrokykh and Solander (#3.11: 2025) find that the EU uses its more for more approach selectively and in a way that particularly benefits neighbouring countries that are of strategic interest to the EU. Similar findings are brought forth by Bosse et al. (D5.3: 2024), demonstrating that in cases like Serbia and Azerbaijan, the EU's interest in economic cooperation and energy security also takes precedence over addressing democratic deficits (D5.3: Bosse et al., 2024). Bosse et al. (D5.3: 2024) point out that engagement with existing elites often has a reinforcing effect here, as it can inadvertently legitimize their positions, even when these elites are obstacles to democratic progress or actively driving democratic backsliding and autocratisation. This not only hinders EUDP but also risks creating a double-edged sword of dependency, whereby the EU loses leverage and neighbourhood countries gain leverage while neighbourhood countries become dependent on certain exports. This is exemplified through the case of Algeria, which has increasingly been able to avoid EU conditionality following its oil and gas leverage, while at the same time becoming more dependent on oil and gas exports (#5.8: Boubekour, 2026; #7.13: Rennick et al., 2025). This export dependency exposes the country to growing vulnerabilities such as market fluctuations, unemployment, inflation and risks threatening the sustainability of co-optation mechanisms (#5.8: Boubekour, 2026). Ultimately highlighting how the selective use of EUDP not only threatens the credibility and leverage of the EU, but also risks contributing to structural blockages in country-specific cases.

A third internal obstacle relates to discrepancies in what the EU seeks to promote. As Bosse et al. (D5.3: 2024) note, the EU's emphasis on regional stability and security often leads to a

tolerance of authoritarian practices, provided they maintain a semblance of order. This is exemplified by the EU's pursuit of stability and top-down approaches that can undermine its own democracy promotion, as seen after Azerbaijan's offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh, where geopolitical goals in the South Caucasus overshadowed local security (#6.8: Luciani, 2025). Similar concerns have been raised regarding Türkiye which also serves as an example confirming the issue of conflicting objectives in EU foreign policy and a turn to more transactional relations with a strong focus on security and migration (#2.9: Coskun and Dück, 2025). As noted by Rennick et al. (#4.9: Rennick et al., 2026), while EUDP can support bottom-up actors, its impact is limited by the EU's top-down orientation and prioritization of stability, which often undermines its credibility as a genuine democracy promoter. The EU's focus on stability over democracy is also illustrated in the case of Ukraine. As Petrov (#7.5: 2024) notes, Ukraine's candidacy was unexpectedly unlocked by Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, which reframed enlargement as a geopolitical and value-based project. The EU's rapid granting of candidate status, alongside initiatives like the EPC and shifts under the CSDP, reflect an unprecedented "accession through war" dynamic aimed at reinforcing European unity and security.

A fourth internal obstacle relates to the bureaucratic structure of the EU. As Shyrokykh et al. (D3.3: 2025) notes, the EU is often slow to respond to developments unless triggered by crises and often targets its response towards short-term strategies rather than more long-term. This is exemplified by the study by Bosse (#5.5: Bosse, 2025) which shows that EU responses to Belarus have been shaped more by short-term, ad-hoc adjustments than by long-term strategic learning. While the EU oscillated between engagement and sanctions, its approach was constrained by bureaucratic rigidity and institutional limits, leading even to the loss of valuable knowledge, such as on civil society engagement. Overall, the case highlights the EU's limited capacity to integrate democracy support into broader foreign policy objectives due to weak institutional memory and learning mechanisms.

In summary, to be an effective and credible democracy prompting actor, the EU needs to overcome these internal obstacles pertaining to EUDP effectiveness.

4.2 How and under what conditions can the EU complement its top-down approach to EUDP with a meaningful bottom-up approach to overcome obstacles (WP2-8)?

Within EMBRACE, we hypothesized that *The EU can make use of a complementary bottom-up approach in countries that allow civil society to maneuver; in authoritarian regimes in which space for civil society has shrunk, the options for EUDP are limited.* Below we provide recommendations for how the EU can complement its top-down approach with bottom-up approaches to overcome obstacles.

EMBRACE confirms that the EU's ability to complement its primarily top-down democracy promotion with a bottom-up approach critically depends on the operating space available for civil society (#2.9: Coskun and Dück, 2025; #4.9: Rennick et al., 2026). In contexts where civic actors retain some room to maneuver, supporting them before democratic openings arise strengthens their ability to capitalize on transitions. While EUDP has positively contributed to the success of bottom-up actors in achieving small-scale gains by supporting civil society before uprisings and providing core support as well as through thematic workshops and capacity-building across various bottom-up actors and by applying leverage to encourage inclusive transition processes, the findings of EMBRACE suggest that more can be done (e.g. #4.9: Rennick et al., 2026). Our research shows that EU democracy assistance should provide core support for organizational stability, diversify funding to grassroots actors, and invest in civic spaces where democratic activism can thrive (#4.9: Rennick et al., 2026; #5.4: Bosse et al. 2025). Moments of systemic change are often unpredictable, and sustained support enables bottom-up actors to secure small-scale democratic gains when opportunities do emerge (#4.9: Rennick et al., 2026).

Effective bottom-up promotion requires more than financial aid. As Jmal (#4.6: 2025) highlights in her study of transitional justice in Tunisia, genuine partnerships demand proactive EU political engagement, defending civil society voices, and safeguarding youth political participation. Rennick et al. (D4.2 2025) identify several enabling conditions: the capital of bottom-up actors; the presence of formal bridges between them and political authorities; alignment on policy or institutional reforms; coalitional strength within civil society; and autonomy from political elites. Such factors allow civil society to advocate, negotiate, and influence reforms meaningfully. Once democratic transitions are underway, EU support should focus on building technical competencies, legal expertise, evidence-based advocacy, and using leverage to guarantee civil society's inclusion in policymaking (D4.2: Rennick et al., 2025).

At the same time, challenges remain. In authoritarian contexts, autocratic strategies of delegitimization, criminalization, and restrictions on foreign funding create a downward spiral that severely limits the scope of EU democracy promotion (#2.9: Coskun and Dück, 2025). While EU instruments for supporting civil society can operate without government consent, politically sensitive or oppositional actors are often unable to access them due to hostile legal environments (Rennick et al., 2025a). Furthermore, project-based financing has proven insufficient: by pushing organizations to expand beyond their expertise to meet donor requirements, it undermines mission focus and sustainability. Core funding, by contrast, enhances strategic capacity and allows civil society organizations to act as more independent and principled partners (#4.7: Koval and Latsyba, 2025). Broader inclusion of lesser-known and informal actors is also needed to prevent monopolization of civic voice by a small set of NGOs (#4.7: Koval and Latsyba, 2025).

Overall, EUDP bottom-up support is most effective in contexts where civil society can maneuver and incremental democratization aligns with EU priorities of stability (D4.1: Rennick et al., 2024). However, in highly repressive regimes, its reach and impact remain limited, reducing the EU's credibility as a promoter of democracy in the eyes of bottom-up actors. Despite frustrations with EU inaction, civil society still recognizes the value of democracy support and sees the EU as an important, if imperfect, ally. Strengthening genuine partnerships and providing sustained, flexible support to grassroots actors is therefore essential if EUDP is to fulfill its potential as a complementary strategy to top-down approaches (D4.2: Rennick et al., 2025; #5.7: Abdallah et al., 2026; D5.1: Bosse et al., 2025; #5.4: Bosse et al 2025).

4.3 How and under what conditions can EUDP integrate local perspectives on democracy from various stakeholders (including women, youth and ethnic minorities) and adjust its “liberal democracy” concept to less contested forms of democracy (WP 3-6 + WP8)?

In EMBRACE we hypothesized that *the EU can integrate local perspectives in all forms of cooperation and at all stages of democracy promotion negotiations through systematically integrating local stakeholders of democracy promotion*. In this section we present suggestions for how EUDP can be enhanced by integrating local perspectives.

The EU emphasises the electoral regime, political rights, civil rights, horizontal accountability and effective power to govern in its reports and programs (#3.4: Grimm et al., 2025). Apart from this, the EU frequently comments particularly on effective, corruption-free public administration and a lively civil society as prerequisites for liberal democracy (#3.4: Grimm et al., 2025). This liberal concept of democracy, although a thick concept that guarantees a sustainable democratic development, is at the moment being contested. The EU should therefore integrate the democracy perspectives of local stakeholders to adjust its concept of democracy and allow for better EUDP results.

By promoting democracy that is context-sensitive, this could potentially enhance the effectiveness of EUDP. To do so, the EU must integrate local perspectives on democracy from various stakeholders. Otherwise, the EU for instance risks reproducing state-centric or masculine approaches that reinforce everyday insecurities in the neighbourhood (e.g. #6.8: Luciani, 2025). This is particularly evident in the case of gender. While the EU in certain countries has been engaged on a local level with feminist actors (for example Tunisia and Ukraine), the same cannot be said for other countries such as Serbia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia (#2.18: Hülzer et al., 2026).

As Rennick et al. (D4.1: 2024) point out, that EUDP in post-uprising contexts largely interacts with political elites, transitional authorities, and formal political institutions, and to a

somewhat lesser degree to professionalized civil society organizations – with the level of grassroots actors being notably ignored (D4.1: Rennick et al., 2024). Furthermore, the EU almost always deferred to the position of authorities and the course of reform that they set rather than that of bottom-up actors (D4.1: Rennick et al., 2024). Yet, it is precisely in post-conflict circumstances that it is important for the EU to involve local actors as Bochsler (D6.2: 2025) notes. Apart from post-conflict conditions, Rennick et al. (D4.2: 2025) suggest that the EU should integrate civil society at two key moments: in the period before democratic opening, and when the window of opportunity for democratic transition has opened (D4.2: Rennick et al., 2025). Especially once a window for democratic transition has opened or a transition process is underway, EU democracy assistance to bottom-up actors should apply leverage to ensure civil society's inclusion in democratic transitions (D4.2: Rennick et al., 2025).

Hence, from the perspective of local civil society activists and grass root movements, the EU should politically, financially, and technically more actively support bottom-up engagement to facilitate meaningful political change. As several members of the EMBRACE stakeholder committees have convincingly argued, initiatives such as the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) seem to be a valuable way to integrate local perspectives on democracy into EUDP.

4.4 How can EUDP countervail anti-democratic (domestic and/or geopolitical) alliances (WP7)?

In EMBRACE we hypothesized that *EU bodies and member states need to internally align their foreign policy goals developing and implementing a consistent and effective strategy to countervail anti-democratic alliances.*

As outlined by Grimm et al. (#2.8: 2025), autocratization forces democracy promoters to operate in more resistant domestic environments and reduces their global leverage due to rising autocratic competitors.² Aprasidze and Gvalia (#7.4: 2025) recommend several action points for the EU to develop and implement a consistent and effective strategy to countervail anti-democratic alliances: The EU should improve coordination within the EU and with non-EU partners to enhance impact, while considering the alternative partnerships available to recipient countries. This has to be combined with a cautious approach that targets key individuals instead of all of the society and flexibly funds and protects civil society actors. Also, the EU needs to be clear about the possibilities of integration and be consistent about its call for reforms. This has to be communicated directly to the public, where disinformation by anti-western actors must be countered. Additionally, contacts between pro-european trajectory

² For detailed overview, see the Special Issue “Democracy Promotion in Times of Autocratization” in Democratization (2025) edited by Sonja Grimm, Brigitte Weiffen and Karina Mross: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/fdem20/32/7>

countries have to be strengthened especially on the actor level and infrastructure, connecting to Europe has to be expanded (#7.4: Aprasidze and Gvalia, 2025; D7.1: Bechev et al., 2025).

The EU faces significant challenges in countering Russia's influence in neighbouring countries such as Belarus, which complicates efforts to support democracy and national resilience. Suggested measures include investing in cultural and language programs, supporting independent media, strengthening ties with civil society and diaspora, and preparing detailed contingency plans for different geopolitical scenarios. Coordinated action with international partners and targeted economic support would further enhance the EU's ability to respond effectively to shifts in Belarus (D5.2: Bosse et al., 2025; #5.4: Bosse et al., 2025). In addition, insights from **WP5** highlight several further priorities. First, the EU should protect and resource small institutional footholds, such as local councils, professional associations, or exile institutions, that can sustain pluralism even when national institutions are closed. Second, EU support should actively broaden coalitions by linking urban NGOs with workers, rural communities, and generationally diverse groups, since only cross-cleavage alliances have the strength to unsettle entrenched regimes. Third, Brussels needs a rapid-response reflex: when protests or scandals create cracks in authoritarian resilience, timely support is crucial to prevent regimes from reasserting control. Fourth, the EU should ensure its engagement on energy, migration, or security does not inadvertently legitimize authoritarian elites, insulating democracy support from short-term realpolitik trade-offs. Fifth, it should amplify counter-hegemonic narratives, for example civic identity, gender equality, or environmental justice, that challenge regime legitimacy. Finally, consistency is key: as the Belarus case shows, sustained, principled support for democratic forces abroad can be more effective than ambivalent engagement (#5.6: Bosse and van den Broek, 2024, #5.5: Bosse, 2025)

Furthermore, the EU should establish and maintain consistent communication channels with neighbourhood opposition. The case of Serbia exemplifies this need. 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 (D4.1: Rennick et al., 2024).

In summary, to effectively counter anti-democratic influences, the EU must develop a coherent and consistent foreign policy strategy that aligns internal goals and coordinates with international partners. Key measures include targeted support for civil society and cross-cutting coalitions, more rapid responses to political openings, and principled engagement that

avoids legitimizing authoritarian elites. Sustained communication with neighbourhood opposition, clear messaging on integration prospects and an amplification of democratic and counter-hegemonic narratives are crucial, as demonstrated by the cases of Belarus and Serbia. Overall, the EU's long-term effectiveness depends on consistency, flexibility, and a strategic combination of political, economic and societal instruments to strengthen democracy and resilience in neighbourhood countries.

5. Given the obstacles to democratisation, how can the EU better adjust EUDP to reflect partner and context sensitivity and increase its effectiveness? (RQ 3)

Finally, this section outlines our third main research question and the sub-questions within it, seeking to provide recommendations for how EUDP can better be adjusted to reflect sensitivity to partners and their contexts as well as the effectiveness of EUDP.

5.1 What are the lessons to be learned for EUDP on the emergence of obstacles to democratisation and its effects on levels of democracy (WP 2-8)

Across EMBRACE, obstacles to democratisation are consistently shown to arise from the interaction of *actors (actor-centered)*, *institutions (institutional)* and *structures (structural)* operating at three levels - *domestic, EU/regional, and international*. This triadic lens and multi-level perspective explain why obstacles not only emerge but also persist and translate into de-democratisation, stalled reform or autocratization. EUDP must therefore diagnose and act across those levels and obstacle types rather than treating obstacles as single-cause problems. Below, we list 7 lessons that can be learned for EUDP regarding obstacles to democratisation and their effect on levels of democracy.

Lesson 1: Overcome EU-internal obstacles and overthink strategic trade-offs

Although on the outside, the EU is often perceived as a unitary actor, it is made up of its organs and their complex interplay as well as its member-states, which are often marked by diverging interests (#2.16: Grimm and Shyrokykh, 2026). This results in EU-internal obstacles on all aforementioned levels: On the actor-level, persistent intra-European disagreement about democracy goals, definitions, target constituencies, and tool use undercuts coherence and credibility (D3.3: Shyrokykh et al., 2025). This is the case both with backsliding member-states, and on level of the EU-parliament, where populist and far-right parties often hinder democracy oriented resolutions (#3.9: Solander, manuscript under review; #3.7: Solander et al., manuscript under review). Structurally, security and economic imperatives routinely trump democratisation, normalising tolerance of illiberal practices for the sake of stability, perceived security and market access, ultimately leading to a stark contrast of the proclaimed

values and the concrete action on site (D5.3: Bosse et al., 2024; D5.2: Bosse et al., 2025; #7.9: Rahal and Al-Fadiq, 2025). The findings of Shyrokykh and Solander (#3.11: 2025) demonstrate this by showing that while the EU rewards democratic progress, it is more likely to reward governance performance in strategically important neighbours. On an institutional level, the complex and inefficient bureaucratic- and decision-structure of EU funding has limited its ability to respond quickly and flexibly to evolving high-stake situations. This in turn is hindering timely support for civil society, as shown by its response to the crackdown on the Belarus anti-government protests 2020 (#5.5: Bosse, 2025). In addition, the instruments used by the EU are lacking coherence and strategic adjustment. While research by Rennick et al. (D4.2: 2025) shows that EU democracy assistance to grassroots actors can secure small-scale democratic change during moments of systemic change, the EUs democracy promotion remains mainly top-down, while important bottom-up tools (EIDHR, EED) are small in budgetary terms. This is limiting possible systemic effects, and keeps the EUs responses reactive rather than strategic (D4.2: Rennick et al., 2025; D5.3: Bosse et al., 2024). The overarching result of these obstacles is inconsistent leverage on democracy levels.

Lesson 2: Increase leverage, influence on elites, and authoritarian counter-pressure

Against the backdrop of global autocratization and thus more resistant domestic environments, it applies that where EU economic or political leverage is thin, influence over domestic trajectories remains weak. Further, EU-engagement through incumbent elites in these situations can even legitimize and strengthen blockage actors (D5.3: Bosse et al., 2024). Sometimes, authoritarian patrons may outweigh EU leverage altogether (D3.3: Shyrokykh et al., 2025). Therefore, the EU not only has to consider the alternative partnerships available to recipient countries, but has to pair engagement with explicit conditionality, use targeted sanctions on obstructionist elites, and coordinate with like-minded partners (internally and externally) to amplify its influence (D5.3: Bosse et al., 2024; D3.3: Shyrokykh et al., 2025). Thus, the establishment and maintaining of consistent communication channels with neighbourhood opposition is of importance for the EU (D4.2: Rennick et al., 2025). In addition to inter-partner coordination, contacts between pro-European trajectory countries have to be strengthened especially on the actor level and infrastructure as well as intercultural and diaspora projects, connecting to Europe have to be expanded (D5.2: Bosse et al., 2025). Also, the EU needs to be clear about the possibilities of integration and be consistent about its call for reforms, communicating this information directly to the public, where disinformation by anti-western actors must be countered (#7.4: Aprasidze and Gvalia, 2025).

Lesson 3: Strengthen bottom-up support

EU backing to civil society yields small but meaningful gains chiefly during pre-opening and transition windows (D4.2: Rennick et al., 2025). Its impact however depends on the civil society actors' pre-existing "capital": Their formalised access to decision-makers and consultative or negotiation fora, as well as the autonomy of civil society from parties or elites in general (D4.1: Rennick et al., 2024). In repressive legal environments, bottom-up tools on

the other hand have limited reach. Here they rarely change regime direction (D4.2: Rennick et al., 2025; D4.1: Rennick et al., 2024). In this environment the EU should move to protect and resource “small democratic institutional footholds” that keep pluralism alive when national arenas are closed (e.g., local councils, professional associations) and, where relevant, exile institutions (#5.4: Bosse et al., 2025; D5.2: Bosse et al., 2025). Therefore, the EU should generally supplement its insufficient project-based financing with core funding of civil society that enhances strategic capacity and allows civil society organizations to act as more independent and principled partners (#4.7: Koval and Latsyba, 2025). Here, the EU should also shift to flexible funding for organizational stability, diversify recipients beyond professionalised NGOs to grassroots actors and protect civic spaces where activism can thrive. In parallel, EU support ought to broaden coalitions by connecting urban NGOs with workers, rural communities, and generationally diverse constituencies, since only cross-cleavage alliances have the leverage to unsettle entrenched regimes (D5.2: Bosse et al., 2025). Thus, it is clear that effective bottom-up promotion requires more than financial aid, but building of technical competencies, training in legal expertise and evidence-based advocacy, and finally using leverage to guarantee civil society’s inclusion in policymaking (D4.2: Rennick et al., 2025). As moments of systemic change are often unpredictable, the EU should keep this support sustained and timed to windows of opportunity to enable bottom-up actors securing small-scale democratic gains when opportunities do emerge (D4.2: Rennick et al., 2025). Furthermore, once democratic openings are presented, the EU should make use of its conditionality and leverage to ensure that civil society is integrated into the transition process (D4.2: Rennick et al., 2025; D4.1: Rennick et al., 2024; #4.9: Rennick et al., 2026). To this end, the EU needs a rapid-response reflex: when protests, scandals, or other shocks open cracks in authoritarian resilience, timely, well-targeted aid is essential to prevent regimes from reasserting control (#5.4: Bosse et al., 2025; D5.1: Bosse et al., 2025).

Lesson 4: Include local perspectives

The EU’s own liberal-democracy model, emphasising the electoral regime, political rights, civil rights, horizontal accountability and effective power to govern remains its own reference point, but is globally being contested (#3.4: Grimm et al., 2025). The EU’s democracy promotion practice skews to elites and formal institutions, putting the goal of stability over the goal of transformation (D4.1: Rennick et al., 2024). This applies in particular to post-uprising contexts, where EUDP favours interaction with political elites, transitional authorities, and formal political institutions, while civil society organizations and especially grassroots actors are being disadvantaged (Rennick et al., 2024). Here, the EU risks reproducing state-centric or masculine approaches that reinforce everyday insecurities in the neighbourhood, especially in the case of gender (e.g. #6.8: Luciani, 2025). Integrating local conceptions of democracy in all forms of cooperation and at all stages of democracy promotion negotiations can thus improve uptake and therefore the effectiveness of EUDP (D8.1: Grimm et al., 2025). However, civil society inclusion is beneficial only where it can

mobilise freely, otherwise it is easily instrumentalised (#6.6: Kyselova, 2023). Above all, this applies to post-conflict settings, where security dilemmas foster nationalist or ethnic outbidding and fragmented external sponsorship erodes guarantees of the settlement (D6.2: Bochsler, 2025).

Lesson 5: Take gendered aspects of EUDP more serious

The EU should move from counting participation to transforming power and embed intersectionality as a structural, political framework with clear, enforceable indicators and accountability. It should strengthen co-creation with local actors and protect civic space, tie conditionality and funding to substantive gender-equality outcomes and not just outputs, ensure consistency across instruments and anticipate and counter anti-gender backlash with explicit political strategies (#2.18: Hülzer et al., 2026). While doing to, the EU should avoid similar patterns to its bottom-up support, where EUDP instruments often provide short-term, bureaucratic, or depoliticized aid to feminist and queer actors, limiting impact on structural inequalities (#2.18: Hülzer et al., 2026). The EU should also widen its geographical focus on gender issues: While it engaged on a local level with feminist actors in countries like Tunisia and Ukraine, the same can not be said for other countries such as Serbia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia (#2.18: Hülzer et al., 2026). Finally, the EU should recognize that in patriarchal and conservative societies, emerging social narratives often clash, which require careful attention from international actors. For example, following the first Pride parade in Belgrade in 2001, opponents saw Pride as a threat to democracy and as a means to restore authoritarian rule (#4.5: Vranic and Ilic, 2025). For the EU, this means accounting for the contested nature of social change in patriarchal and conservative societies in order not only to promote gender equality reforms but also to ensure that these do not spill over into authoritarian support.

Lesson 6: Consider geopolitics and enlargement policy as democracy tools

The effectiveness of EUDP in the European neighbourhood suffers from geopolitical and geo-economic obstacles that emerge from competition of the EU with other major powers, especially Russia, Saudi Arabia and China. As the intensity of a country's ties with external actors depends on domestic factors such as elite preferences, historical legacies, socio-cultural affinities, geopolitical context, and perceived economic benefits, authoritarian actors often employ subversion, co-optation, and economic engagement for fostering their autocratic influence, delegitimize pro-Western governance, or create dependencies exploitable for coercion (#7.10: Armakolas et al., 2026; D7.2: Armakolas et al., 2025). While, in view of this, Russia is the most acute blocking actor in the Eastern neighbourhood, among other things using hybrid warfare, support for pro-Russian elites, and ideological tools to counter EU influence, Saudi-Arabia and China form parts of a revisionist network and, in the case of China, act as economic counterweights to EU-influence (D6.1: Pogodda and Richmond, 2024; #7.7: Petrov, 2024; #6.9: Luciani and Shevtsova, 2024; #7.4: Aprasidze and Gvalia, 2025; #7.10: Armakolas et al., 2026; D7.2: Armakolas et al., 2025). This underscores that EUDP's success also depends on a complex interplay of external rivalries, domestic politics, and the

strategic agency of authoritarian actors, that is not considered in the EU's policy decisions enough. The case of Georgia for example illustrates a reciprocity deficit. Here, Russian influence was able to rise amid EU enlargement-hesitation (#7.4: Aprasidze and Gvalia, 2025). The case of Ukraine on the other hand shows, that enlargement can be reframed as war-resilience and ultimately value projection post-2022 (#7.5: Petrov, 2024). The lessons to be learned for the EU here are to clarify integration pathways whilst coordinating with partners, to target key spoilers as well as protect and fund civil society flexibly to counter disinformation by geopolitical rivals (#7.4: Aprasidze and Gvalia, 2025) while remaining sensitive to the shifting presence of external pressures (D7.1: Bevech et al., 2025). Comparative findings show that the EU's *own geopolitical bargains* can also entrench closure: energy-first engagement with Azerbaijan, or aid channelled through sectarian elites in Lebanon, directly reinforced authoritarian resilience (#2.17: Susanna i López, 2026). In Serbia, enlargement ambivalence gave elites space to play the EU against Russia and China while consolidating control. By contrast, Belarus demonstrates that consistency matters more than access: sustained support for exile institutions preserved pluralist alternatives even under near-total closure.

Lesson 7: Beware of policy-implications for democracy levels

EUDP most reliably produces incremental, durable gains when (a) there is a EU internal consensus about the priority of democratisation, (b) bottom-up support is sustained, timed to openings and coupled with bridges to institutional access for civil society, and (c) leverage is sharpened through targeted conditionality and pressure. In hybrid and authoritarian regimes there are different pathways to political openings (D5.1: Bosse et al., 2025; #5.4: Bosse et al., 2025; D5.2: Bosse et al., 2025). In Belarus, a broad protest coalition and exile institutions briefly punctured regime closure, though repression reasserted control. In Serbia, local institutional footholds and cross-class coalitions around environmental issues created temporary openings despite elite dominance. By contrast, in Lebanon and Azerbaijan, protests remained too narrow or structurally insulated to endure. This underscores that EUDP impact depends on recognising which opening pathway is emerging, whether through shocks, institutional footholds, or cross-coalitional mobilisation, and adapting its support accordingly to each specific context. Effects of EUDP on the other hand are muted or even regressive when the EU employs a stability-first or ambivalent logic, oriented on the gains of its disagreeing parties, its engagement remains elite-centric, civic space remains closed in partner countries and authoritarian counter-leverage prevails unobstructed by geopolitical EU initiatives (D4.1: Rennick et al., 2024; D5.3: Bosse et al., 2024; D3.3: Shyrokykh et al., 2025).

5.2 How can the EU combine the variety of existing EUDP instruments more effectively?

The EU's soft power through democracy promoting tools has had a limited ability to shape political outcomes in its vicinity. In other words: Its effectiveness is severely limited., as Shyrokykh et al. (D3.3: 2025) note. While EUDP instruments aimed to foster stability, security, and prosperity in the 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 (D3.3: Shyrokykh et al., 2025). Moreover, EU membership prospects—once considered the most effective democracy promotion tool—appear to have a negative impact, challenging previous assumptions (#3.8: Solander, 2025).

But, as Ioannides (D8.3: 2025) argues, the EU has already at its disposal well-oiled instruments that have been reformed and adapted over the years and have to different extents shown their merits. Importantly though – with regards to their limits in generating good results – their operational effectiveness has to be enhanced. Therefore, Ioannides (D8.3: 2025) argues, it is essential to seamlessly integrate established EU policy tools managed by the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the EU delegations. The key element here is connecting the dots so that the EU external action tools can be systematically categorised and leveraged. The toolkit can serve as a central hub for mapping and tracking the use of these tools to streamline both the financing and reporting (D8.3: Ioannides, 2025).

For this integration of tools to be possible, one could consider a clear EU-wide baseline definition of democracy - a normative core including free and fair elections, civil and political rights, rule of law, accountability along the lines of the concept as discussed in Shyrokykh et al. (D3.3: 2025). Within that baseline, there is and can be space for local adaptations that capture plural practices of participation what the EU should actively foster. Such a two-step approach (e.g. baseline concept of democracy plus local adaption), alignment with stated goals could be more achievable. However, empirically so far, Shyrokykh et al. (D3.3: 2025) show that while EU democracy aid positively impacts various forms of democracy, it does not support the core of liberal democracy, revealing a gap between EU objectives and actual outcomes (D3.3: Shyrokykh et al., 2025) what needs to be overcome. Therefore, the authors argue that a strategic, coordinated approach among European democracy promoters is essential. 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. Democracy promoters therefore must recognize existing conflicts of objectives and take proactive steps to address them rather than passively waiting for outcomes to unfold (D3.3: Shyrokykh et al., 2025).

In addition to EU-internal unity, Paül i Agustí et al. (D8.2: 2025) suggest, that transnational and multidirectional exchanges, challenging the traditional notion of a one-way flow (from the EU to its neighbourhood) and recognising the mutual importance of cultural and political interactions in democratisation processes matter (D8.2: Paül i Agustí et al., 2025). Ioannides (D8.3: 2025) thus suggests an imperative of co-creation. EUDP and its instruments must prioritise the integration of local partners, such as think tanks, journalists, academics, youth organisations, NGOs and civic groups, to co-design measurement frameworks and policy responses. By shifting local civil society from passive beneficiaries to active co-creators, Ioannides (D8.3: 2025) argues, the EU can significantly mitigate the historical risk of top-down democratisation failures. This collaborative approach fosters local ownership, legitimacy, and long-term resilience, transforming the paradigm from one of “democracy promotion” to a more sustainable model of “democracy co-creation” (D8.3: Ioannides, 2025).

The findings of EMBRACE indicate that the EU can promote democracy by facilitating people-to-people movements, ultimately supporting democratic development in neighbouring countries. Solander et al. (#3.6: Solander et al., 2025 manuscript under review; #8.4: Paül i Agustí, 2026) test the impact of different types of people-to-people interactions on democracy in neighbouring states. Their results show that among tourism, student exchanges, and migration, migration exhibits the strongest association with higher democracy levels in these countries. This is because migration—or what Solander et al. (#3.6: Solander et al., manuscript under review; #8.4: Paül i Agustí, 2026) term “embedded linkages”—provides non-EU citizens with direct exposure to EU democratic practices and societies. Through this experience, migrants acquire cultural and democratic capital, which can then be transmitted to friends and family in their home countries, fostering broader diffusion of democratic norms.

5.3 What tools and resources can EMBRACE suggest and provide to the EU in order to contribute to a more effective partner- and context-sensitive EUDP? (WP8)

In general, it seems imperative for the EU to adopt nuanced, inclusive, and context-aware strategies, and by finding a more careful balance between promoting its values and its strategic interest to better support democratic development in its neighbourhood.

Across the EMBRACE outputs, it becomes clear, that the EU should become a more dynamic and adaptive democracy promoter that (1) puts accessible, actor-facing knowledge in the hands of local change agents; (2) couples geospatial and temporal analytics to detect openings and tailor interventions; and (3) institutionalises an adaptive planning and transparency architecture that links measurement, foresight, and EU external financing and diplomacy in continuous feedback loops. Layer (1) is supported by the Digital Platform on Democratisation-Related Skills (D8.1: Grimm et al., 2025), layer (2) by the Interactive Mapping

Tool (D8.2: Paül i Agustí et al., 2025), and layer (3) the Dynamic Toolkit Blueprint (D8.3: Ioannides, 2025), developed by EMBRACE based on the project's findings. Furthermore, the EU should base its decisions on empirically well-grounded up-to-date data on target countries and the effectiveness of democracy promotion instruments employed towards these countries. Such a resource is provided by the D3.1: EMBRACE dataset (and can be visualized through the EMBRACE interactive web application).³

Tool 1: Digital Platform for activists

EMBRACE's digital platform, as described by Grimm et al. (2025) is based on clear, concise, and instructive case studies that demonstrate how civil society actors have effectively responded to democratic backsliding and governance challenges—with the direct or indirect support of the European Union. These success stories highlight diverse strategies employed by grassroots organisations, including advocacy campaigns, civic oversight initiatives, coalition-building efforts, and consultative dialogues with state institutions (D8.1: Grimm et al., 2025). These stories can be organised into five thematic clusters based on the type of EU support provided: *Financial support*; *Technical assistance*; *Diplomatic support*; *Discursive alignment*; *Convening and bridge-building*. This categorisation not only demonstrates the range and adaptability of EU democracy support instruments, but also serves as a practical guide for other activists and civil society organisations seeking to understand what kind of support is possible and how it can be leveraged in different political environments (D8.1: Grimm et al., 2025).

The aim of creating the digital platform was to make these stories easily accessible in an engaging and user-friendly format, especially for civil society actors who may not typically engage with formal reports or academic publications. By doing so, the platform strengthens EU outreach to grassroots actors, supporting their efforts through tailored, accessible knowledge-sharing (D8.1: Grimm et al., 2025). Through that, it supports the broader strategic objectives of the European Union, namely, to promote resilient democracies, informed citizenry, and active civil societies across its neighbourhood and beyond (D8.1: Grimm et al., 2025).

Apart from an interactive mapping tool, discussed later, the digital platform offers five thematic boxes that showcase success stories of EU-backed democratic change led by civil society. Each box contains a representative “bubble” graphic linked to a short, context-specific narrative text. These concise case studies offer users the ability to quickly compare different national experiences in a visually coherent and accessible format. The goal is to allow activists and civil society organisations to draw inspiration from successful examples of EU supported mobilisation and understand how shared challenges are being addressed across

³ This web application can be accessed using the following link: <https://embrace.shinyapps.io/embrace/>.
Username: embrace Password: wuerzburg

regions. Overall, the Activists Space is tailored to the needs of the target group mentioned in its name. It simplifies complex project outputs into actionable and relatable knowledge while emphasizing the EU's critical support to democracy promotion through civil society engagement (D8.1: Grimm et al., 2025). It enables learning, fosters civic empowerment, encourages peer-to-peer exchange, and showcases the value and impact of EU democracy support (D8.1: Grimm et al., 2025).

Tool 2: Interactive Mapping Tool

The interactive mapping tool, integrated on the aforementioned website, is designed to visually represent and enhance understanding of democracy trends and EUDP instruments across a wide range of political, social, and conflict-affected contexts in the European Neighbourhood. As Paül i Agustí et al. (D8.2: 2025) note, at the core of the tool lies the newly collected data and comparative analyses of EMBRACE, concerning the main obstacles to democratisation, as well as pathways and strategies to overcome them (D8.2: Paül i Agustí et al., 2025).

The purpose of the tool is twofold: first, to support the strategic selection, prioritisation, and targeting of EUDP interventions in environments characterised by varying degrees of democratic backsliding, authoritarian resilience, or hybrid regimes; and second, to serve as an accessible and visually compelling advocacy instrument for actors engaged in the promotion of democracy globally (D8.2: Paül i Agustí et al., 2025). Policymakers and scholars can use the insights from the mapping tool to analyse current events and to develop theories and forecast possible future developments and design EUDP strategies to support democratic consolidation in regions where political environments remain fluid and unpredictable (D8.2: Paül i Agustí et al., 2025). It also supports local actors by illustrating where and how EU democracy assistance has had concrete impact (D8.1: Grimm et al., 2025). The mapping tool therefore contributes directly to the EU's goals of transparency, knowledge dissemination, and strategic learning. Moreover, it contributes to the EMBRACE project's aim of offering a renewed policy toolkit for overcoming obstacles to democratisation. It translates complex academic insights into a practical, accessible resource that can inform more strategic, context-sensitive interventions by EU actors and civil society organisations alike. In this way, the tool supports the Union's broader foreign policy objectives of promoting democracy, the rule of law, and human rights in the neighbourhood, while enhancing the stability and security of the region (D8.2: Paül i Agustí et al., 2025).

In practice, the interactive mapping tool offers users a dynamic way to explore how developments of democracy in various countries across the neighbourhood and how these coincide with other variables, such as civil society engagement, democratic resilience, and institutional reforms (D8.1: Grimm et al., 2025). By providing geographically grounded insights, the map allows users to easily identify trends, successful interventions, and region-specific challenges. It facilitates the identification of both structural and actor-based obstacles, while also highlighting potential "openings" or moments of opportunity for

democratic actors to intervene effectively. In this regard, the mapping tool is not merely a data visualisation platform but an interface for comparative learning and strategic foresight, allowing users to explore how various instruments have performed in different regime types, conflict settings, and socio-cultural environments (D8.2: Paül i Agustí et al., 2025).

Tool 3: Dynamic and context sensitive EUDP Toolkit

As Ioannides (D8.3: 2025; D7.3: 2025) acknowledges, EMBRACE's findings point to a fundamental issue of EUDP and its future design: A one-size-fits-all framework would risk oversimplifying the complex and diverse realities of Algeria, North Macedonia, Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus and Azerbaijan among other cases. However comprehensive, it may fail to capture the unique political dynamics, democratic deficits, informal power structures and the unique opening pathways present in each country. The central challenge, therefore, is not to create a better static instrument, but to transform the toolkit into a dynamic, responsive, and operationally specific adaptive system. The true measure of its value will be its capacity for a continuous, tailored application that addresses the specific needs of each country in the EU neighbourhood (D8.3: Ioannides, 2025). In that sense, the toolkit should connect the dots between the following key ingredients of the EU's external action: Political and Diplomatic Tools; Financial Instruments and Support; Programmes and Technical Assistance; Rapid Response and Monitoring. Going beyond these suggestions, an extended toolkit should also apply a "democracy-impact filter" to EU external deals, screening for risks of legitimising authoritarian elites (D5.2: Bosse et al., 2025).

A more effective toolkit on EU democracy promotion in the neighbourhood requires deeper engagement with local actors and the strategic use of transparency as a policy tool. Therefore, Ioannides (D8.3: 20025; D7.3: 2025) conducted a scenario-building exercise in four selected countries with a selection of stakeholders vested with expertise in EUDP and the EU's role in geopolitics. Based on this exercise and its positive experience with co-designing policies that builds on focus-group and forecasting methodologies, Ioannides (D8.3: 20025; D7.3: 2025) suggests that the toolkit must provide a detailed plan for engaging with local civil society groups, journalists, academics, and youth organisations to shape its tools and policy proposals. It should also facilitate participatory workshops in recipient countries to capture genuine public sentiment on democracy reforms and a 360-degree view of the (d)evolution of policies and reforms (D8.3: Ioannides, 2025). Beyond what D8.3 suggests, a EUDP toolkit should further include a monitoring and early-warning mechanism to identify and protect such footholds (e.g., local councils, professional associations, or exile institutions) before they are eliminated (D5.2: Bosse et al., 2025). The toolkit should also aim to build a relationship with non-governmental stakeholders, moving away from mere consultation to a situation where local stakeholders receive feedback from the EU on their input as well as follow-ups and explanations for the EU recommendation. Especially in the case of the candidate countries, sectorial consultation should be further developed. Additionally, civic representation metrics should be enhanced to include marginalised groups such as ethnic

minorities, women, and rural communities. For this, coalition-mapping indicators, capturing whether civic alliances reach across class, geography, and identity lines, should be included. The toolkit should therefore facilitate the development of country-level public dashboards and scoreboards, which are to be shared with local stakeholders to promote open dialogue. The methods and data underpinning the toolkit must also be made accessible in local languages and culturally appropriate communication formats. This approach could also act as a counter-disinformation measure (D8.3: Ioannides, 2025). Embracing the local' constitutes a critical step to ensure that the toolkit adapts its data collection and measurement frameworks to local realities, moving beyond generic metrics. This involves incorporating country-based data sources, such as national statistics offices, local surveys, and media monitoring platforms, in addition to Eurostat and other international datasets. This approach ensures that the assessments of electoral processes, political participation, and civil liberties are grounded in the specific conditions of each target country (D8.3: Ioannides, 2025; D7.3: Ioannides, 2025).

Furthermore, refining the toolkit's measurement tools can generate nuanced evaluations, Ioannides (D8.3: 2025) points out. This implies using mixed-methods assessment tools that are informed by expert local panels with deep regional expertise. Such engagement can elicit data on specific elements, such as informal governance networks or the characteristics of hybrid regimes. This is a strategic move that addresses a critical limitation of relying solely on established democracy indexes, which although they provide valuable benchmarks, their universal application may fail to capture the subtle, non-institutionalised forms of control and influence that are prevalent in the targeted regions (D8.3: Ioannides, 2025). To move from reactive to proactive policy on EU democracy promotion in the neighbourhood, the toolkit would also incorporate strategic foresight methods such as horizon scanning and megatrends analysis, but with a specific focus on developing country-specific scenarios. These scenarios should account for each country's unique geopolitical position, external pressures, and domestic vulnerabilities (D8.3: Ioannides, 2025). By systematically linking the data inputs from its measurement frameworks to these foresight techniques, the toolkit could move EU methods from a static report generator into a dynamic, inter-linked predictive analytics engine. This would enable policymakers to generate "if-then" scenarios based on identified triggers and drivers. Depending on likelihood and impact, drivers can be categorised as improbable, possible and probably. They can be organised in terms of their impact (low, moderate, high, intolerable) (D8.3: Ioannides, 2025). The live mapping of the state of EU's monitoring tools combined with the live update of implementation of its external financing instruments could enable the toolkit to be a strategic tool for allocating funds to build resilience against specific vulnerabilities identified by foresight methods. Therefore, creating a direct causal link between data, analysis, and proactive resource allocation could ensure that the toolkit goes beyond forming a simple data repository and goes beyond simple tracking (D8.3: Ioannides, 2025).

Resource: Dataset on EU democracy promotion instruments

In addition to these suggestions, we also recommend the reader to make use of the dataset created in **WP3** (D3.1: Shyrokykh and Grimm, 2025). This dataset provides valuable data on EUDP tools as well as obstacles, offering a comprehensive foundation for analyzing not only the direct effects of EUDP tools but also the mediating impact of various obstacles. By including both challenges to EUDP and data on various EUDP tools, this data enables for a nuanced understanding, in line with the EMBRACE framework, of how EUDP tools interact with obstacles to democratization. Ultimately, offering the possibility of rigorous evaluation of EUDP impact, facilitating the design of more targeted and efficient democracy promoting strategies and providing actionable insights for improving EUDP strategies. Furthermore, the dataset offers the possibility of conducting comparative analysis across various contexts, revealing efficient ways of executing EUDP across diverse contexts and contributing to evidence-based strategies for maximizing the effectiveness of EUDP initiatives.

6. Conclusions

Democracy promotion has become increasingly challenged over the course of the EMBRACE project, both within the EU, in the European neighbourhood and at a global stage (#2.20: Grimm et al., 2025), and multiple obstacles are present (#2.19: Grimm et al., 2026). Criticism is frequently raised that the EU would engage inconsistently, and at times context-insensitively while democracy promotion policies seem to be regularly compromised by higher ranking foreign policy goals such as military security, economic prosperity, or migration control.

EMBRACE findings confirm these challenges but also point to ways forward. To be effective, the EU must combine a principled, norm-based foreign policy with strategies that are more adaptive, inclusive, and geopolitically aware. This means ensuring coherence across EU institutions and member states, protecting even small institutional footholds, broadening support beyond professionalised NGOs to cross-cleavage coalitions, and adopting tools that respond quickly to shocks while remaining consistent over the long term.

It also requires filtering foreign policy bargains for their democracy impact, and integrating local perspectives and narratives that resonate with diverse societies. In an era of democratic decline and intensifying geopolitical rivalry, recommitting to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law is not only a matter of principle but a strategic necessity: it is the foundation for building inclusive and resilient societies, both within the EU and in its neighbourhood, capable of resisting authoritarian closure.

7. References

*Please kindly note: In this Combined Synthesis Paper, EMBRACE's academic and policy-oriented deliverables and further EMBRACE publications are referenced. Administrative or technical EMBRACE reports, particularly of **WP1** (D1.1, D1.2, D1.3, D1.4), **WP2** (D2.1), **WP9** (D9.1, D9.2, D9.3) and **WP10** (D10.1, D10.2), are not referenced in this document*

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D8.2: Paül i Agustí, Daniel; Susanna i López, Èlia; Mòdol Ratés, Josep Ramon; de Pablo Jou, Belén (2025): Interactive Mapping Tool. Deliverable 8.2. EMBRACE.

D8.3: Ioannides, Isabelle (2025): A Strategic Blueprint for a Dynamic EU Democracy Promotion Toolkit. Deliverable 8.3. ELIAMEP.

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#8.4: Paül i Agustí, Daniel (2026): Spatial Analysis of the Relationships Between Capital and People Mobility and Democratic Progress in the European Neighbourhood. In: Sonja Grimm, Karina Shyrokykh, and Véronique Dudouet (ed.): Authoritarian Resilience vs. Democratic Aspirations. Assessing the European Union's Democracy Promotion towards its Neighbourhood in Turbulent Times. Routledge.