



SOUTH-EAST EUROPE PROGRAMME

The EU's Democracy Promotion and Geopolitical Competition

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Summary

The European Union's capacity to foster democracy in its neighbourhood is increasingly constrained by a dual challenge: the pushback from authoritarian powers like Russia and China and the domestic political dynamics in partner countries. This policy report draws on granular empirical evidence and comparative analysis from five states—Algeria, Georgia, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine—to seize the nuances in the approach (objectives, tools, tactics) of Russia and China and to identify patterns in how EU leverage is shaped by external authoritarian strategies and internal political conditions. The report draws conclusions about the conditions under which EU democracy promotion has the potential to be impactful when facing geopolitical challengers, offering ideas for its future design improvements.

This policy report finds that:

- The EU's democracy promotion tools are most effective when paired with credible enlargement prospects and coherent conditionality.
- Authoritarian rivals, particularly Russia, deploy a mix of coercion, subversion, and co-optation, capitalizing on internal vulnerabilities.
- Domestic elites play a decisive role in shaping the direction of foreign alignment, often exploiting ties with Russia and China to cement their hold on power and dilute EU influence.

Societal attitudes significantly condition the success of EU or authoritarian leverage.

The policy report argues that, beyond geopolitical competition and authoritarian diffusion, as the most common explanatory devices for the spread of authoritarianism to be found in the scholarly literature, democracy is often undermined as an “unintended consequence” of the domestic actors’ multiple engagements with external actors.

The report also concludes that democracy promotion is not merely a matter of institutional engineering but a geopolitical contest where domestic politics and external power plays intersect. The outcome is contingent on EU consistency, strategic adaptation, and the good understanding of the limitations and opportunities of the domestic political context in partner countries.

Finally, the report offers recommendations for tailoring EU democracy promotion policies in response to the challenges faced by increasingly emboldened geopolitical and authoritarian rivals. The recommendations pertain to the type of instruments the EU is fielding in geopolitically contested states, the relationship to domestic political elites and civil society in these countries, and the communication and economic instruments intended to appeal to the wider societies.

1. Introduction to the EMBRACE project

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

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

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

The research is structured around four thematic clusters: the re-configurations for democratic policy shifts after popular uprisings; democratisation and economic modernisation in authoritarian and hybrid regimes; the nexus between democratisation and peace; and the geopolitics of EUDP and the competition that the EU encounters in its democracy promotion efforts. This report focuses on Work Package 7, which aims to understand the EU's democracy promotion potential when confronted with geopolitical



challenges by powerful and authoritarian geopolitical rivals. It analyses how all these forces interact, compete, clash or cooperate, and how such interplay raises obstacles or offers opportunities for democracy promotion by the EU.

2. Introduction to this Policy Report

Since the end of the Cold War, the European Union (EU) has positioned itself as a champion of democratic norms and values, using a combination of economic assistance and political conditionality to push for institutional and political reforms in target countries. These efforts are particularly pronounced in regions such as the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, and North Africa—areas characterized by fragile institutions, hybrid regimes, and complex geopolitical alignments. As immediate neighbours of the EU, those regions have been the primary target of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the EU enlargement process, which now covers Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in addition to the Western Balkans.

However, EU democracy promotion now unfolds in a hostile strategic environment. Authoritarian powers like Russia and China have expanded their regional footprints and actively challenge the EU's normative agenda. With its aggression against Ukraine culminating in a full-scale invasion, Russia has resorted to crude military power to assert its primacy. Faced with this reality, political elites in countries next door to the EU increasingly adopt hedging strategies, playing with all external powers to maximize regime survival or economic gain. This interplay between external pushback and internal resistance complicates the EU's ability to shape political trajectories in its neighbourhood.

This policy paper is the outcome of rigorous research on the geopolitical competition to EU democracy promotion conducted in the context of the EMBRACE project. It draws on a cross-regional comparison of five countries—Algeria, Georgia, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine. It highlights the limitations of EU influence, identifies the modes of authoritarian contestation, and explores how domestic political contexts determine the effectiveness of democracy promotion. The aim is not only to diagnose challenges but to propose strategies that could help recalibrate the EU's external democracy promotion.

3. EU Leverage: Dense Ties, Uneven Impact

EU democracy promotion rests on a set of well-established instruments: political conditionality, economic incentives, technical assistance, and societal engagement. These instruments are operationalized through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) for Algeria and through the Enlargement Policy for Serbia, North Macedonia, Ukraine and Georgia. All five countries in question have dense trade and investment ties with the Union, in most cases their leading economic partner, and are also linked to member states thanks to large diaspora populations. In that sense, both linkage and leverage – two variables highlighted by the literature on international promotion of democracy (Levitsky and Way 2005) – favour the EU's role as a driver of political and institutional reform.

The EU's Democracy Promotion and Geopolitical Competition

However, the EU's track record is, at best, mixed. Success is rare and setbacks common. North Macedonia and Ukraine are two cases giving grounds for qualified optimism. In both countries, the EU has demonstrated its potential to support democratic breakthroughs. In North Macedonia, the European Commission and the European Parliament played an important role in resolving the 2015-2016 political crisis, combining mediation, support to civil society, and conditionality tied to the broader EU accession agenda. Moreover, the Prespa Agreement concluded between Skopje and Athens, which resolved the long-standing naming dispute, was conditioned by the attraction of EU membership (Armakolas 2023, Bechev 2022). However, the Europeanisation process ground down to halt in 2020 owing to new hurdles North Macedonia confronted because of France delaying, and later of Bulgaria blocking, its progress.

Similarly, in Ukraine, post-Maidan governments embarked on reforms under the impetus of societal demand, EU encouragement and the prospect of becoming a member of the 28-strong bloc. Russia's full-scale invasion has shifted the priorities of the Ukrainian state from governance and market reform to ensuring state survival in the face of a mightier adversary. Yet it has also propelled Kyiv further on the path to membership, with formal negotiations launched in 2024. Despite the political, economic and institutional obstacles going forward, at present Ukraine has a chance to enter the EU in the following decade. Particularly if NATO membership is off the table, accession to the Union would provide the highly desired anchor to the West that Ukrainians have pursued for at least two decades.

Yet these successes do not tell the full story of the complex landscape of EU democracy influence and other cases illustrate the limits of EU's policies. In Georgia, despite robust public support for membership in the EU, which hovers around 80% of the populace, the government of the Georgian Dream (GD) party has slowed down (and arguably reversed) the effort to secure accession together with Ukraine and Moldova. GD gradually distanced itself from the EU, especially when democratization has threatened its political dominance. The passage of a highly problematic foreign agents' law in 2024, inspired by legislation Russia adopted in the 2010s, coupled with the alleged irregularities at the October 2024 general elections have deepened the rift with the EU. In Algeria, the EU has largely prioritized stability and energy cooperation over democracy promotion. The 2019 Hirak protests received lukewarm support from Brussels, revealing a strategic preference for regime continuity over democratic change.

Even in the EU accession countries, conditionality is inconsistently applied. Serbia continues to slide into hybrid authoritarianism with little EU pushback. President Aleksandar Vučić has managed to simultaneously negotiate EU accession and cultivate ties with Russia and China, taking advantage of the EU's reluctance to prioritize democracy over regional stability as well as its dire need to access critical resources. Europe's reaction to an unprecedented wave of popular protests, which unfolded after November 2024 and demanded greater transparency and accountability, has been half-hearted at best. The outreach by Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos to pro-rule-of-law protesters has not moved the needle for the overall policy of the EU, which prefers engagement over confrontation with President Vučić.

EU credibility oftentimes falls prey to internal divisions. Member states diverge in terms of geographical focus, with some looking at Ukraine and the rest of Eastern Europe, others prioritising the Western Balkans while still others interested in the Maghreb, the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. Though the Russian aggression has helped soften such divisions by creating a sense of a common threat, they have not been fully overcome. Historically, member states have variable levels of commitment to enlargement

too. While some see it as compatible with their strategic interests, others are concerned it might undermine the EU's internal cohesion.

There are also institutional factors at play. Unanimity rules in enlargement decisions allow individual countries —such as Hungary or Bulgaria—to block or delay progress over bilateral issues or political calculations, as seen in North Macedonia and Ukraine. Though there have been multiple proposals coming from think tanks and academic researchers to reform decision-making on enlargement by introducing qualified majority voting (QMV), there is no sufficient mass in the EU Council to support such a move. As a result of all that, the EU has often struggled to deliver on promises to aspirant countries.

The experience of the countries under investigation shows that inconsistencies in EU policies, ambiguity over strategy, principles and priorities, as well as occasional failures in implementation limit the effectiveness of the EU's democracy promotion tools. Local leaderships recognise the opportunity presented by these challenges and often devise a strategy of “pick and choose” of aspects of EU integration that suit their agenda and benefit their political, economic and strategic interests, while at the same time increasingly resist those aspects of EU ties that may challenge their authority or upset domestic equilibria. Aspects of these conclusions can be observed to a greater or lesser extent in all countries investigated. But the cases of Algeria and Serbia stand out as the ones where the ruling elites have found unique ways to make ties with the EU beneficial to their regime and its survival prospects.

Overall, the democracy promotion toolkit of the EU has the potential to foster democracy and strengthen resilience against external authoritarian pressure in aspiring countries. But the likelihood for success increases significantly when the pro-democracy policies are paired with a credible EU membership prospect and conditionality. Analysis shows that close economic, political, and institutional ties to the EU alone do not guarantee democratization, especially when the accession outlook is uncertain. Inconsistent application of democracy promotion tools or conflicting EU priorities risk undermining both their effectiveness and the EU's overall credibility. Finally, authoritarian states—especially Russia—have shown a keen interest in shaping the democratization trajectories and undercut the EU's positive influence on the examined countries.

4. Authoritarian Rivals: Strategies of Pushback

The EU is coming to terms with the fact that it is no longer the only game in town when it comes to influencing domestic politics. Authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states such as Russia, China, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates are growingly present on the European periphery. Of these, Russia and China are the two most remarkable cases. As early as 2008, the prominent scholar of democratisation, Larry Diamond, noted that “[the a]uthoritarian regimes in Russia and China are acting as black knights, supporting autocrats and undermining democratic transitions by providing diplomatic cover, economic aid, and sometimes even security assistance to embattled regimes.”

Russia and China are not ideologically committed to spreading authoritarianism per se, but they actively contest the EU's influence when it threatens their strategic interests. In the Russian case, the latter include influence over institutions and elites in adjacent countries that are considered by Moscow as its

“privileged sphere of influence” or its “near abroad.” Beijing’s policies are more low-key, undermining alignment with the EU when it goes against China’s (predominantly business) interests, while increasing its political and economic footprint, but still without adopting the aggressiveness that Russia often uses. Russian and Chinese objectives, strategies and methods vary. Russia aims to blunt the EU’s – and more broadly the collective West’s – leverage, undermine its normative standing and accordingly increase their own room for manoeuvre. China, on the other hand, aims to secure allies to pursue its global agenda and opportunities to advance its economic priorities. In that context, while its objectives do not clash with enlargement countries’ bid to join the EU, Beijing’s approach is not always compatible with EU norms and standards, and it sometimes exploits structural governance weaknesses.

5. Russia’s and China’s strategies fall into three categories:

5.1 Coercion

Coercion involves the use of tools designed to compel a significant shift in the target’s behaviour. This includes direct military action or the threat of force, intervention in internal conflicts, terrorism, cyberattacks, and various forms of economic pressure such as sanctions or embargoes. These instruments are intended to impose costs that alter the target's strategic calculus.

Russia’s approach in Ukraine demonstrates how far it is willing to go to prevent EU integration. After the 2013 Euromaidan protests and the pro-European turn, Russia responded with the annexation of Crimea, support for separatists in Donbas, and eventually a full-scale invasion in 2022. In Georgia, the 2008 war was a similar move to destabilize a reformist government and maintain influence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

5.2 Subversion

Subversion (or soft coercion), by contrast, seeks to weaken an adversary—be it the EU, the broader West, or Western-aligned governments—from within. The ultimate aim is behavioral change, achieved through the erosion of institutions, norms, or public trust. This domain is extensively covered in the literature on "hybrid" threats, which span both overt and covert activities below the threshold of open conflict.

Russia presents many examples of subversion. It excels at using hybrid tools to undermine democratic institutions and pro-Western narratives. In North Macedonia, Russian-linked actors used disinformation and Orthodox Church networks to oppose the Prespa Agreement in 2018-2019. In Serbia, Russian-backed media outlets reinforce nationalist sentiment and scepticism toward the West. Their message is amplified by the mainstream media, including TV channels, news portals and tabloids that are linked to President Vučić. In a similar way, China has worked to undermine trust in Western-style democracy – e.g. propagating its success in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21 and presenting the performance of EU members and the United States in negative light.

5.3 Co-optation

Co-optation operates through the cultivation of relationships with domestic elites—political parties, business lobbies, media outlets, or civil society groups—to shape a target country’s foreign policy or

internal choices. This approach provides external actors with channels of influence embedded within local power structures. A well-documented example is Russia's strategic presence in the energy sector across Eastern Europe and even within the EU's core.

Similarly, China primarily uses economic tools—investment, loans, and trade partnerships—to create dependencies and cultivate elite networks. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and bilateral deals often bypass transparency mechanisms, contributing to state capture and corruption. This strategy is evident in Serbia, where Chinese investments have expanded rapidly, including in strategic sectors like energy and infrastructure. Algeria presents a case of strategic triangulation, where both Russia and China are welcomed as partners in arms sales, infrastructure, and diplomacy. While their influence remains mostly co-optative, it offers the regime a buffer against EU democratization demands. In Georgia, the ruling party has allowed increasing Chinese economic presence and has taken a softer line on Russia since 2022, to offset the increasing EU influence over the country's democracy and reform agenda. Strengthened ties with authoritarian countries became the counterbalance to EU's pro-democracy influence which had the potential to undermine the power base and authority of the ruling political elites in Tbilisi.

6. Domestic Elites and Public Attitudes

The five cases under examination demonstrate that Russia and China are effective in countering the EU policies and influence only because they find allies within the countries. Domestic political elites early on draw the conclusion that closer ties with the EU come with policy impact that may prove challenging for the survival of their regime or the longevity of their governments. They quickly adapt to the situation, incorporate the EU impact on their cost-benefit calculations, and develop counterbalances to influence that is potentially harmful to their interests, including by increasing ties with EU's rivals. Thus, both Russia and China often find the political circumstances in different countries ripe for increasing their footprint and unfolding their agendas.

Both Russia and China maintain strong military, economic, and diplomatic ties with Algeria while avoiding overt interference. Their influence is primarily co-optative—built on elite networks and strategic infrastructure investments—rather than subversive. Russia leads in arms sales and military cooperation, whereas China focuses on infrastructure and surveillance technology. Both actors also engage in vigorous public diplomacy, targeting Algerian media to counter Western narratives. Importantly, the role of Algeria's regime is crucial in making the co-optative policies possible. The Algerian ruling elite triangulates between the EU and these external players to maximize its autonomy and expand its room for manoeuvre in foreign policy. This balancing act reinforces internal cohesion and bolsters authoritarian resilience.

A similar dynamic is evident in Georgia. The ruling Georgian Dream party prioritizes regime survival over alignment with EU democratic standards. It combines formal EU ties with growing cooperation with China and a muted alignment with Russia, especially following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While Russia exploits political polarization and institutional fragility—classic subversive tactics—the more decisive factor remains the agency of domestic actors. In Georgia as in Algeria, co-optation is the principal strategy used by Russia and China to blunt EU-led democratization, though Moscow retains also coercion as a viable tool, given its military capabilities and economic leverage.

The EU's Democracy Promotion and Geopolitical Competition

Ukraine represents a contrasting scenario. There, Russia has long since abandoned co-optation and subversion in favour of direct coercion. Since 2014, military aggression has become the primary instrument to thwart Ukraine's EU aspirations, overshadowing earlier tools such as economic pressure and disinformation. China, by contrast, has adhered to a strategy of co-optation, maintaining economic engagement (e.g., Belt and Road projects) while presenting itself as a neutral actor. Beijing avoids direct confrontation, diplomatically supports Russia, and carefully manages its relations with both Ukraine and the EU.

In the Western Balkans, Russia counters EU influence through a dual approach: exploiting societal divisions (subversion) and cultivating networks with local actors—politicians, civic groups, businesses, and national Orthodox Churches. Serbia offers a textbook case. Since the mid-2000s, political elites and influential societal actors have aligned with Russia. Moscow's influence has benefited from enablers such as state capture, media control by President Aleksandar Vučić and his allies, aggressive nationalism, and the marginalization of opposition forces. As in Algeria and Georgia, Serbia's leadership uses its ties with both Russia and China to pursue a "multi-vector" foreign policy. This strategy supports regime durability and dilutes the impact of EU democratic conditionality. In North Macedonia, Russia has deployed media manipulation, proxy actors, and disinformation—often via Serbian networks and Orthodox Church links—to disrupt Euro-Atlantic integration. Influence operations peaked in the late 2010s following the Prespa Agreement with Greece. Tactics included propaganda and intelligence-driven subversion.

In both Serbia and North Macedonia, China has pursued a quieter path. It avoids direct confrontation with the EU agenda, instead promoting economic cooperation through infrastructure projects and trade. Its involvement—often via opaque loans and non-transparent procurement—undermines good governance by reinforcing corrupt practices. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China successfully leveraged propaganda and disinformation to boost its image, often with the active participation of local actors such as President Vučić. Still, China's approach remains firmly co-optative; subversion is rare, and coercion is not a preferred tool.

Overall, our analysis has found that significant EU influence on domestic political dynamics, including in the democratisation process, tends to be resisted by ruling elites through seeking geopolitical counterbalances. Such resistance is more effective, and EU's influence less powerful, the more a country in question is geopolitically contested between the EU and its authoritarian rivals. Influence is also a function of the type of pressure coming from the EU. When the EU does not have the ambition to significantly influence and alter the domestic political landscape or when receiving countries already have well-established and consolidated autonomous international role and they avoid being tied to one only geopolitical option, then any influence coming from Europe will tend to be more limited. Conversely, countries and ruling elites with limited autonomous international role and less foreign policy clout are less likely to seek extensive geopolitical realignment and more likely to accept the geopolitical anchoring to the West and its democracy implications.

The autonomous role of domestic elites and their resistance to EU democracy influence tend to be facilitated and made easier by matching public attitudes in their respective countries. In every country case that we have studied, higher popular support for non-EU influence or for foreign relations that counterbalance the EU makes it much easier for political elites to challenge the conditions set by the EU

and the democracy requirements that accompany EU ties. The resilience of (semi-)authoritarian elites is stronger in countries where the EU and its influence are not popular.

In contrast, the role of the economic dimension proved more complicated to gauge than what we had originally expected. Our analysis has shown that there is no straightforward correlation between economic ties and propensity to align politically or accept pro-democracy influence. Rather, what we have found is that political elites chart a policy path between economic benefits and political autonomy. Decisions are not determined by economic dependencies alone but are also highly influenced by domestic popular attitudes, historical legacies, ruling elites' political strategies and broader geopolitical dynamics. The role of the economic dimension is dynamic and context specific, always shaped by political strategies, elite priorities and the broader societal context.

7. Conclusions

Across these three regions—North Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Western Balkans—several core conclusions emerge:

Domestic factors are the primary obstacles to democratic development. Authoritarian norms, institutions, practices, and societal preferences, in combination with structural governance weaknesses, often present a complex, self-sustaining and with deep roots reality that severely challenges the EU's ambitions for transformative influence. The EU's transformative power, that comes through leverage (democratic conditionality) or diffusion (economic and societal linkages), can be drastically limited by the strong presence of these internal conditions.

External authoritarian actors benefit from these domestic conditions both relatively and absolutely. In relative terms, the EU is at a disadvantage, providing rivals with a comparative edge. In absolute terms, domestic deficits—polarization, institutional fragility, underdevelopment, and state capture—create openings for external authoritarian influence. The motivations of EU's authoritarian rivals—whether geopolitical rivalry or authoritarian promotion—are secondary to the methods used to achieve influence, as well as the outcome.

Co-optation is the preferred method for both Russia and China. It is cost-effective and relies on partnerships with local elites. Subversion and especially coercion are riskier and more costly, potentially provoking backlash from within target states or from the EU. Coercive actions, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, can have unintended consequences, including closer alignment between the target and Western actors.

8. Policy Implications

The case studies suggest that democracy promotion is not a technocratic process but a political contest. The EU's credibility and effectiveness depend on three pillars: coherence, consistency, and contextual awareness.

- **Coherence:** The EU must align its strategic interests with its normative agenda, and this should be reflected by all EU actors – institutions and member states. Prioritizing short-term stability (e.g., on energy or migration) at the expense of democratic values weakens long-term influence. EU and member states should also work more to have their positions and agendas aligned. Internal divisions within the EU, especially when it comes to policies and ties that have impact on democracy, tend to dilute the EU's message, undermine its leverage and make it overall less credible and relevant.
- **Consistency:** Conditionality must be applied uniformly. Turning a blind eye to democratic backsliding, as for example in Serbia, undermines incentives for reform in other countries.
- **Contextual Awareness:** Democracy promotion must be tailored to local conditions. Where public support for EU integration is high (e.g., Georgia, Ukraine), civil society should be a strategic ally. Where sovereigntist sentiment is strong (e.g., Algeria), EU engagement must be more subtle but no less principled.

9. Policy Recommendations

The changed geopolitical reality and pressing need for the EU to re-assert its influence in its immediate neighbourhood mandate a bolder approach in re-imagining the EU's democracy support. Support for continuous democratization of the EU's neighbourhood is an investment in the EU's own security, reducing the space for manoeuvre of EU's geopolitical rivals and building stronger allies that will be able to resist external actors' pressure that indirectly affects EU's interests (e.g., reducing migratory pressures, securing energy supplies, closing enforcement gaps in sanctions/restrictive measures, reducing disloyal competition for EU and local actors et al.). This is even more important as these countries progress towards EU membership, but also as means to address current loopholes and build resilience. The improved understanding of the specific links between democratization and geopolitics should translate into targeted policy improvements in several areas:

- **Step up the geopolitical game:** As both Russia and China speak the language of multipolarity, the EU needs to step up the game in demonstrating that its neighbourhood is its own "sphere of influence". On the medium to long term, this can be achieved through a credible and consequential enlargement policy. On the short term, however, the European institutions and local EU actors (e.g, EU Delegations in the neighbourhood) need to be more vocal on geopolitical topics and call foul all direct attempts by both external and domestic actors to undermine democracy and European values, membership-related reforms and alignment with the acquis.
- **Streamline gradual accession in CFSP:** The gradual accession, that is the inclusion of negotiating countries in specific EU-level policies and instruments before membership, should extend to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Candidate countries with full CFSP alignment should be allowed to seat as observers in Council meetings where decisions are discussed. This will serve as encouragement to maintain full alignment, as well as incentive, through peer pressure, to candidate countries who are not fully aligned.

The EU's Democracy Promotion and Geopolitical Competition

- **Re-imagine democracy support in light of geopolitical needs:** The new design and significant reduction in the volume of US Government funding has adversely affected democratization programs and projects in the EU's neighbourhood. To mitigate the consequences, which are especially dire for civil society actors, the EU should re-design its democracy support programs in parallel with the adoption of the new MFF. While this would necessitate an increase in funding, streamlining to maximise the impact and better target the priorities is even more important, considering both the Court of Auditors' recommendations and geopolitical challenges.
- **Encourage local ownership:** If they want to make progress in the accession process, candidate countries should take ownership of democracy promotion and contribute alongside the EU in supporting pro-democracy actors. While the EU should remain in charge of the rules, procedures and oversight, national governments should be asked to provide some amount of financial contribution (co-financing) to national democracy promotion programmes.
- **Enhance resilience against foreign information manipulation:** The EU should encourage candidate countries for EU membership to prioritise the adoption of its Foreign Interference and Manipulation of Information (FIMI) toolkit and align with the Digital Services Act, implementing stricter policies related to media and social media platforms' control over information manipulation (content transparency, inorganic activity, state-controlled entities etc.). This should be teamed with support for media literacy programs, investigative journalism focusing on the dealings of third actors and their proxies, and media projects devising counter-narratives to the propaganda of external actors.
- **Build economic resilience:** The EU's Economic Security Strategy should expand to include, both at the level of design and implementation, the countries in the EU neighbourhood. Their adoption of and alignment with specific instruments, like foreign direct investment screening mechanism or foreign subsidies regulation, have the potential to limit the economic penetration of external actors through their companies that often benefit from subsidies and/or undue practices, distorting the level-playing field to the disadvantage of local and EU companies.
- **Improve strategic communication:** While it cannot be expected that different EU actors, especially member states, speak with one voice on all topics of interests related to the EU's neighbourhood, there should be clear strategic communication plans in place for each country. They should be regularly updated to identify and distinguish between (i) messages that form a clear consensus and need to be amplified, (ii) messages that may create unnecessary divisions, block democratization or empower external actors, hence need to be reviewed and addressed.

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