

# EMBRACE

## Policy Brief 11

**Democracy promotion in Lebanon:  
Policy Recommendations to the European Union  
for an Improved Cooperation Model**

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## About the EMBRACE project

The EMBRACE research project (2022-2025) collects evidence-based knowledge on the obstacles to democratisation and ways to overcome them in five regions of the European neighbourhood: Southern Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, Middle East and North Africa. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and pro-democracy forces to develop effective strategies to promote democratic progress in the European neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, new policy tools for EUDP practitioners and pro-democracy activists are developed based on the project's findings.

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

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

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





*Title page credit: Photo taken by the author on November 1, 2019. It represents a mural from Riad el-Solh Square in Beirut painted during the 2019 uprising.*

## 1 Introduction

The EMBRACE research in Lebanon was conducted between September 2023 and December 2024 by the Berghof Foundation, based on desk research and 25 key informant interviews with experts, activists, civil society organisations, international agencies, and politicians from both emerging political movements and traditional parties. To analyse obstacles to democratisation and identify ways to overcome them, the team explored two related themes: the links between democracy promotion and peacebuilding in Lebanon, and the role of the 2019 popular uprising in advancing small-scale democratic gains. The research also examined the role of EU democracy promotion (EUDP) in the wake of intensified calls for reform by Lebanese citizens, particularly given that the EU is a major donor in Lebanon.

## 2 Background and context

Since 2019, Lebanon has faced consecutive and multi-faceted crises:

-  In 2019, Lebanon witnessed the beginning of a financial collapse<sup>1</sup> and a country-wide uprising against political elite;<sup>2</sup>
-  In 2020, an explosion at Beirut Port's ammonium nitrate storage facility killed more than 200 people and devastated large parts of the capital;<sup>3</sup>
-  In 2021-2022, amid of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank announced that Lebanon's economic and financial crisis was ranking among the ten most severe crises globally since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> The Lebanese population suffered from acute shortages of essential goods such as fuel and medicine, alongside government paralysis and a vacant presidency;
-  In 2023, the war on Gaza led to the opening of a battlefield on Lebanon's southern border and a bombing campaign across the country, peaking in summer-autumn 2024 and resulting in more than 4,000 deaths.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Reuters analysis: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-lebanon-crisis-financial-explainer/explainer-lebanons-financial-meltdown-and-how-ithappened-idUKKBN268223/>

<sup>2</sup> See Amnesty Intl report: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/10/lebanons-october-2019-protests-werent-just-about-the-whatsapp-tax/>

<sup>3</sup> See HRW report: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/08/03/they-killed-us-inside/investigation-august-4-beirut-blast>

<sup>4</sup> See WB report: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/01/lebanon-sinking-into-one-of-the-most-severe-global-crises-episodes>

<sup>5</sup> See HRW report: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/23/lebanon-indiscriminate-israeli-attacks-civilians>

### 3 Research Findings

The EMBRACE research in Lebanon reveals growing frustration and distrust towards the international cooperation model as a whole, with the EU, UK, and US at the forefront of international support. The research shows that obstacles to democracy lie at the intersection of domestic factors (such as entrenched corruption and patrimonial systems) and international dynamics (including the limited commitment of foreign donors to genuine democracy promotion and their continued partnerships with undemocratic institutions). These structural and institutional constraints have been exploited by ruling elites, exacerbating instability and raising doubts about the overall function of international cooperation.









Although the research timeframe spans 2019-2023, the findings are deeply shaped by the context prevailing during the interviews, notably the financial and political collapse of 2023-24 and the subsequent wars on Gaza and Lebanon. Respondents expressed widespread perceptions of double standards by ‘the West’ – particularly the US and the EU – in their reactions to Israeli aggression against Gaza and Lebanon. This was viewed as evidence of the EU’s lack of genuine commitment to peace and to the well-being of the Lebanese population. Many felt the EU had missed key opportunities for meaningful democratisation in Lebanon during and after the 2019 uprisings.

EU officials interviewed acknowledged that the EU is not perceived as a change-making actor and that it tends to be risk averse. The EU was seen as lacking intentionality in formulating, implementing, and monitoring democratisation policies in Lebanon. Instead, observers suggested that EUDP in Lebanon appears driven by opportunistic circumstances that primarily serve EU interests. Activists and politicians noted that the EU’s continued engagement with the political elite during Lebanon’s crisis years (2019-24), and its muted response to Israeli aggression, demonstrated that EU democracy promotion and Western engagement more broadly are not guided by principled approaches or by the international norms – such as democracy, human rights, and accountability – that they advocate to Lebanese partners.



Given this erosion of trust, respondents proposed developing a new understanding of EU democracy promotion in Lebanon, revising outdated cooperation frameworks, creating more inclusive consultation mechanisms, and expanding networks to include more representative actors across the country. Based on these insights, this policy brief outlines several recommendations for EU and other international policymakers and donors.





## 4 Policy Recommendations

### 4.1. Rethinking and using EU leverage effectively

-  The EU should reassess the validity of its peacebuilding approach and reconsider how it uses its leverage, as its 'peace' interventions have largely served the interests of the political elite and produced only short-term stabilisation. In many cases, efforts to advance democratic practices have failed to foster sustainable peace or stability and have at times deepened conflict.
-  Any use of leverage to advance democracy in Lebanon should be carefully timed and context-sensitive. This includes considering economic sanctions against individuals charged with or under investigation for corruption or negligence.
-  The EU should use its leverage to promote freedom of expression by reviewing partnerships with state or local institutions that suppress political freedoms or violate the basic human rights of Lebanese citizens and Syrians in specific local communities.
-  The EU should exert pressure and ensure proper monitoring to guarantee the independence of the judiciary.
-  The EU should support and fund a new national census (the last was conducted in 1932). This would enable evidence-based policymaking, a fairer allocation of resources, and a more representative electoral law that could level the playing field for democratic competition in parliamentary elections.
-  A scenario-planning exercise should be conducted to assess the potential short-, medium-, and long-term implications of using or withholding EU leverage.
-  For optimal results, the EU's diplomatic corps and headquarters (including its donor agencies) should coordinate more effectively on policymaking, due diligence – including assessments of state institutions – and expenditure monitoring.
-  The EU should reconsider its broader international cooperation approach in Lebanon, as decades of support for NGOs have inadvertently contributed to the depoliticisation of society. Young people have increasingly shifted away from organised politics towards issue-based activism aligned with donor agendas.

### 4.2. Promoting the effective inclusion of civil society and women in policymaking

-  Prioritise long-term investments in capacity building and institutional support rather than short-term, project-based interventions aimed at immediate visibility.
-  Fund digitisation efforts in public administration to enhance access to information and strengthen transparency and accountability.

-  Improve coordination between the EU and other donor agencies to ensure complementarity and avoid fragmentation or duplication.
-  Support more inclusive mechanisms for women's participation beyond the usual circle of established activists, including those from conservative backgrounds and areas outside Beirut.
-  Broaden consultation processes and expert networks to avoid the creation of elitist civil society circles and to allow new voices from underrepresented regions to be heard.
-  Shift donor priorities away from large NGOs with donor-driven agendas towards grassroots movements, labour unions, and member-led organisations such as cooperatives and depositors' unions. This shift would foster sustainable, bottom-up pressure for reform, challenge elite dominance, and promote deeper democratisation.