



New ideas on democracy support based on local views across the region

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Abstract

In theory, EU democracy support should have a greater chance for engaging with its immediate Eastern Neighborhood due to persuasive practices of democratic diffusion. However, to date the EU's record in the region has been mired with controversy, lending both the concept and practice of democracy support to greater scrutiny. The report explores new ideas on supporting democracy practices by domestic actors and the EU in two countries of the Eastern Neighborhood, Ukraine and Belarus. Being at different stages of their democratization journeys and on different trajectories of cooperation with the EU, with Ukraine being a candidate for EU membership since 2022, and Belarus remaining under extensive sanctions since the fraudulent presidential elections in 2020, the two countries offer ample opportunities for the exploration of democracy learning loop in practice. Based on the analysis of secondary and primary data, conducted by the Working Package 2 Team, led by P12-the University of Warwick, in collaboration with Work Package 7 and Work Package 4, that contributed to the task empirically and conceptually respectively, we have identified four ideas for new solutions to the challenges of democratic practices, faced by the Eastern Neighborhood countries and EU Democracy Support (DS) in the region. These ideas call on the EU and its local counterparts to: 1) differentiate between DS aimed at state institutions and civil society; 2) create opportunities for engagement with all local communities of practice, without prejudice and assumptions as to what these communities are; 3) be open to learning about key values, underpinning democratic practices of all stakeholders involved; and 4) embrace self-governance as a key democratic practice in the studied countries and the region.

Introduction

This report is prepared under the framework of the SHAPEDEM-EU Project 'Rethinking and Reshaping the European Union's (EU) Democracy Support in its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods' within Work Package 2 (WP2). WP2 takes stock of democracy-related dynamics in the Eastern Neighbourhood over the last decade by studying local expectations and practices of democracy, democratic politics, and international efforts in democracy support amidst multi-layered practices of contestation.

The WP2 team analysed secondary and primary data, collected in 2023-2025 to generate ideas for new solutions to the challenges of democratic practices, faced by the Eastern Neighbourhood countries and EU Democracy Support (DS) in the region. The full analysis is provided in the article "EU democracy support in the Eastern Neighbourhood: Communities of practice and democracy learning", being prepared for publication within an edited volume as part of D1.6. Both the report and the article are completed as part of Task 2.3, which maps out the gaps in practising democracy, especially when supported by the EU and identifies solutions, focusing on the internal and external 'gatekeepers' who mediate the interrelations between the EU and 'local' voices. They contribute to Objective 2.3, exploring mechanisms for a more effective and inclusive Democracy Learning Loop (DLL) to ensure closer interrelationships between local visions/local ownership and the EU to improve tools to support practices of democracy in the target countries. The DLL model treats democracy support as a collective democratic learning effort of all stakeholders involved. This approach shifts the conceptualisation of democracy support away from seeing the EU as the sole democracy promoter and the EU's partners as passive recipients of its democracy support. Instead, it places all actors involved at the centre of creating a more responsive and reciprocal EU democracy support agenda in both neighbourhoods and in the EU.

The report explores new ideas on supporting democracy practices by domestic actors and the EU in two countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood, Ukraine and Belarus. Being at different stages of their democratisation journeys and on different trajectories of cooperation with the EU, with Ukraine being a candidate for EU membership since 2022, and Belarus remaining under extensive sanctions since the fraudulent presidential elections in 2020, the two countries offer ample opportunities for the study of DLL in practice. The report proceeds in four parts. 2. Description of Activities explains how we collected and analysed data for our work and details contributions of project partners in the process. 3. Results provides an overview of novel thinking about democracy, underpinning the analysis, and introduces new ideas for democracy support in Ukraine and Belarus, based on local views. Part four briefly summarises deviations and part five draws conclusions.

1 Description of Activities

In theory, EU democracy support should have a greater chance for engaging with its immediate Eastern Neighbourhood due to at least persuasive practices of democratic diffusion. However, to date the EU's record in the region has been mired with controversy, lending both the concept and practice of democracy support to greater scrutiny. To better understand why the EU struggled with DS in the Eastern Neighbourhood as a whole, and Ukraine and Belarus in particular, and how it could learn from its past experiences and from local contexts, we set out to engage with local voices, including practitioners and analysts.

Prior to initiating the collection of primary data, the WP2 team, led by P12 – University of Warwick (UoW), reviewed relevant sources of secondary data, primarily from local authors to identify key concerns and challenges of democracy promotion for the Eastern Neighbourhood (January-August 2023). The review was conducted by all WP2 members, which alongside P12-UoW, included P1- Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU), P2- Carnegie Europe Foundation (CEF), P3-Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), P4- Roskilde University (RUC), P6- Jagiellonian University in Kraków (JUK), P7- National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NaUKMA) and P9- Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP-CSF). It laid the foundation for online surveys on local perceptions and practices of democracy in three case-study countries - Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, carried out by P7-NaUKMA in March-July 2023. In Ukraine, a random sample of 997 mobile phone numbers was used, and the results were weighted according to the latest available official data on the distribution of the population by sex, age, region, and type of settlement. The data, collected through surveys was analysed by the WP2 team and used as a stepping stone for online focus group discussions (FGDs) with civil society and media representatives in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, conducted by P7-NaUKMA in February-September 2024. Both Belarus and Ukraine had three FGDs, with the former including 21 and the latter 18 persons, representing civil society and media.

The surveys and focus groups are key sources of primary data used for our analysis. These data are also supplemented by findings from policy roundtables, organised by P2-CEF as part of WP7 in 2023-2025, and citizen juries, held in Ukraine in May 2025 by P7-NaUKMA. Originally, it was planned that citizen juries will be the main source of data for Task 2.3, yet this had to be reconsidered due to increasing instability in the studied region and restrictions, imposed by the martial law in Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion on P7-NaUKMA, the holder of the fieldwork budget within WP2 (also see 4. Deviations summary).

1.1 Methodology

The online surveys, focus group discussions, policy roundtables and citizen juries aimed, among other objectives, to capture a more nuanced understanding of what EU democracy support meant on the ground, and how it was perceived by its ultimate beneficiaries - civil society and the wider public in general. Given that these data sources were used for the achievement of several project tasks, it is necessary to briefly explain the methodology behind them. The *online surveys* took a deeper look at how democracy is envisaged and practised in three countries of the region: Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The aim was to operationalise the practices of democracy as a collection of intergenerational knowledge, founded on cultural values and traditions, and socio-cultural imaginary of the future, defined as a “good life”, while putting the emphasis on the local actors. The collected data was analysed through the frequency analysis, regression models, correlations and two types of factor analysis: Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and Principal Component Analysis (PCA). These methods uncovered similarities and differences between the local perceptions and practices of democracy in the studied countries but also highlighted the need for delving deeper into the issues, which appeared to be both highly valued by local actors and understudied by external actors, including the EU, in particular, participatory practices and self-governance. These were investigated within the *FGDs in the Eastern Neighbourhood*. The FG discussions were aimed at exploring how democracy in general and EU democracy support in particular were perceived through the lenses of local democratic knowledge and contextualizing local narratives on democracy support and contestation. The data were analysed using the method of thematic analysis and MAXQDA software to identify, map and explain local perceptions of democracy, democratic values, democratic practices, and external democracy support in each country. In this report, we focus on the findings of the FGs in Ukraine and Belarus, or in the latter’s case the exiled civil society (see section below on limitations).

Additionally, in May 2025, citizen juries were held online in Ukraine by P7-NaUKMA with citizens from different parts of Ukraine, who are residents of small towns (less than 50 thousand) and rural communities. Two groups of citizen juries were held, and each group had two meetings over the course of 2 weeks. Each citizen jury consisted of 12 persons of different age, sex, social, educational and professional background, and from different part of Ukraine (but only from the communities in East-South of Ukraine, Centre-North of Ukraine, West of Ukraine that are under the government control). In the second meetings, participants were joined by members of self-government from some of their communities. The results of these meetings were analysed alongside the findings of roundtables in Brussels, held by P2-CEF in 2023-2025 to facilitate a dialogue on improvements to the EU’s democracy support practices with various stakeholders, engaged in DS in Ukraine and Belarus.

1.2 Limitations

After having discussed the data collection methodology, it is important to acknowledge some theoretical, empirical and geographical limitations of this study. First, this report focuses primarily on Ukraine and Belarus, while also referencing the geographic area of the Eastern Neighborhood as a whole, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova. Due to individual situations in the studied countries – full-scale war in Ukraine and authoritarian crack down on all forms of dissent in Belarus – we had to adopt our research to the local context. This meant that in Ukraine, while the online surveys were representative, they were not conducted in the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv and Zaporizhzhia regions as well as the Crimea. In Belarus, participants for FGDs were recruited among the activists and experts, who were outside of Belarus and/or in exile. Second, there are timeframe limitations, too. In this report, the primary data refer to

the present, i.e. 2023-2025 years. The secondary data (existing research) focuses mostly on the last five to ten years. Finally, the last limitation is that every effort has been made to highlight specifically local voices. Identifying and using local views in the context of war and authoritarian environment is an immense challenge. While all fieldwork exercises followed the ethical guidelines, which included anonymity and confidentiality, it should be noted that local views were difficult to recruit and even then, they were often restricted by self-censorship of the local participants. In addition, there is a decent number of relevant publications on the EaP countries and their democratization and democracy support practices. However, their majority is mainly produced by Western or other external to the EaP scholars. For this reason, there was a conscious effort to include more publications by local authors, but this selection might be limited by language (only English language resources were used) and topic (only publications on democracy and democracy support were used).

2 Results

Despite its *longue durée*, democracy today is more contested than ever before. The past two decades have seen unprecedented change in scholarly critical thinking in understanding democracy both as the concept and the practice. The new thinking has evolved as a shift away from mechanistic and teleological readings of democracy of the 1990s, as exemplified by the Transition Paradigm (Carothers 2002), towards a more nuanced and even heuristic engagements with the concept premised on its local vernacular meanings, in the late 2010s onwards. The latter considerably expanded the epistemological boundaries of the concept, ensuing its comprehensive pluralisation and empirical contextualisation. Pluralisation of the concept not only evinces differences within an established cluster of liberal democracies, but also shows that there may be other practices of democracy organised along the differing concepts of 'normal', based on social memory and social dreaming. This is where contextualisation of the concept becomes relevant as it emphasises that models of democracy are tied in crucial ways to social and political contexts and can also represent specific social and political experiences.

These new readings of democracy allowed us to approach it as a meaningful practice for communities, where self-organisation and multiple learning loops are constantly at work. By analysing our rich secondary and primary sources, we have identified four new ideas for addressing gaps in EU democracy support in Ukraine and Belarus, which could also be relevant to other states of the Eastern Neighbourhood. These ideas include:

1. **Differentiation between DS aimed at state institutions and civil society.** DLL is an approach that is inclusive of both actors involved and ideas considered (Achrainer and Pace 2024, 12-13). While the EU has been actively engaging with both state and civil society actors in the studied countries, though to a different extent, given their diverging development, our data revealed that it often failed to recognise differences between them and used overly abstract rhetoric, avoiding precise language and clear-cut issues. That is why, FGD participants called for greater accountability and a firmer approach from the EU, when dealing with state institutions and more specificity and practicality when engaging with civil society.
2. **Creating opportunities for engagement with all communities of practice,** without prejudice and assumptions as to what these communities are. For example, in Ukraine the EU has been actively working with large non-governmental organisations for decades, while at the same time ignoring smaller organisations but also more loosely organised parts of civil society such as volunteer movements as they do not easily fit into the Western-centric definition of civil society. This not only left large parts of Ukrainian civil society unsupported but also created a

distorted picture of democratic practices in the country. In Belarus, at least while Lukashenka's regime remains in place, there is a need to continue working with civil society in exile but also look for possible ways to engage with activists in the country, while exerting pressure on the government.

3. **Openness to learning about key values, underpinning democratic practices of all stakeholders involved.** This applies to both the EU and local actors. For the EU, it is advised to move away from promoting the predominantly Western European interpretations of "core norms", such as liberty, rule of law and civil rights (Achrainer and Pace 2024, 12-13) and prioritise the inclusion of localised and contextualised accounts into its DS. For local actors, it is as much about educating themselves on why certain values are of importance to the EU as well as about being more proactive in explaining how these might clash with their own interpretations.
4. **Embracing self-organisation.** The analysis of our secondary and primary data highlighted self-governance as a key democratic practice in the studied countries and the region. In her work Korosteleva (2025) advances the notion of resilience as self-governance as an optimal way for communities to practise democracy and manage themselves more effectively and inclusively, bottom-up and horizontally, in times of increasing uncertainty and change. In this interpretation, resilience is an attribute of a *collective entity*, or a community of relations, understood here in a broad sense, as a group of individuals having a certain characteristic in common, including being bound by a specific locality, culture, behaviour, norms, institutions, and most relevantly, a 'shared vision' of the good life, and a commitment to uphold that shared way of life. This 'community' - be it a family, extended kinship, neighbourhood area, districts, or organised forms of civil society - aims to organise itself, within the broader established institutional settings, to stay responsive to change and transform to amplify its agency, cognition and affect. In each country, self-organisation has its own roots and pursues different goals on a different scale. By applying DLL, it is possible to harness the power of self-organisation for improving EU DS.

In summary, DLL and resilience as self-organisation, can give us a useful new framework to understand how governance (and democracy in particular) should be enabled and what kind of support might be needed to sustain a collective nature of nurturing democracy and growing community's capacities to manage their own futures.

3 Deviations Summary

While initially citizen juries and policy round tables were identified as key primary sources of information for the completion of Task 2.3, within which this report is published, the increasingly unstable situation in the Eastern Neighbourhood and restrictions on the transfer of money internationally, imposed by the martial law on NaUKMA in Ukraine, meant that we had to rely on additional data sources. These were focus group discussions in Ukraine and Belarus, and online surveys in Ukraine. Additionally, in the case of Belarus, an important deviation was that the participants for these groups were recruited among the activists and experts, who were outside of the country and/or in exile. Furthermore, the Ukrainian survey did not cover the parts of the country, currently or previously occupied by Russia.

4 Conclusions

This report is prepared by SHAPEDEM-EU Project's WP 2 as part of Task 2.3 which maps out the gaps in practising democracy in Eastern Neighbourhood, especially when supported by the EU and identifies solutions, focusing on the internal and external 'gatekeepers' who mediate the interrelations between the EU and 'local' voices. Its findings are formulated on the basis of nearly three years of researching local perceptions and practices of democracy in the Eastern Neighbourhood as a whole and two of its states, Ukraine and Belarus in particular. They contribute to Objective 2.3, exploring mechanisms for a more effective and inclusive Democracy Learning Loop (DLL) to ensure closer interrelationships between local visions/local ownership and the EU to improve tools to support practices of democracy in the target countries. The WP2 Team was led by P12 – University of Warwick and included P1- Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU), P2- Carnegie Europe Foundation (CEF), P3-Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), P4- Roskilde University (RUC), P6- Jagiellonian University in Kraków (JUK), P7- National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NaUKMA) and P9- Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP-CSF). Together, these research partners:

- reviewed secondary data on democracy practices and perceptions to identify key concerns and challenges of democracy promotion for the Eastern Neighbourhood (January-August 2023);
- developed online surveys on local perceptions and practices of democracy in three case-study countries - Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, carried out by P7-NaUKMA in March-July 2023;
- designed focus group discussions (FGDs) with civil society and media representatives in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, conducted by P7-NaUKMA in February-September 2024;
- contributed to the development of citizen juries, held in Ukraine by P7-NaUKMA in April 2025; and
- analysed the findings of policy roundtables in Brussels, held by P2-CEF within WP7 in 2023-2025.

In this comprehensive research, we studied democracy as a meaningful practice for communities, where self-organisation and multiple learning loops are constantly at work. Based on the analysis of secondary and primary data, we have identified four ideas for new solutions to the challenges of democratic practices, faced by Ukraine and Belarus and EU Democracy Support (DS) in the Eastern Neighbourhood. These ideas call on the EU and its local counterparts to: 1) differentiate between DS aimed at state institutions and civil society; 2) create opportunities for engagement with all local communities of practice, without prejudice and assumptions as to what these communities are; 3) be open to learning about key values, underpinning democratic practices of all stakeholders involved; and 4) embrace self-governance as a key democratic practice in the studied countries and the region.

5 References

Achrainer, Christian and Michelle Pace 2024. Concept manual. SHAPEDEM-EU Publications, available at https://shapedem-eu.eu/user/pages/06.publications/SHAPEDEM-EU_Publication_2_Concept_Manual.pdf, last consulted on 10 February 2025.

Elena Korosteleva (2025 forthcoming) Complexity and Community in IR: nurturing resilience in Central Eurasia (OUP 2025)

Consulted SHAPEDEM-EU Reports

D1.2 Gawrich, Andrea and Lea Konrad 2024. 'Working paper on gender equality'. SHAPEDEM-EU Publications.

D1.3 Osypchuk, Anna, Anton Suslov, and Yaroslava Shaporda 2024. 'Working paper on digital transformation'. SHAPEDEM-EU Publications, open access, available at https://shapedem-eu.eu/user/pages/06.publications/SHAPEDEM-EU_Publication_5_Digital_Transformation_as_a_Double-Edge_Sword_for_Democracy.pdf, last consulted on 5 February 2025.

D1.4 Achraier, Christian, and Michelle Pace 2024. 'Working paper on democracy learning loop concept' (sensitive). SHAPEDEM-EU Publications.

D2.1 Korosteleva, Elena, Anastasiia Kudlenko, Anna Osypchuk and Anton Suslov. Technical & analytical report of online survey results (Sensitive, 2024). SHAPEDEM-EU Publications.

D2.2 Osypchuk, Anna, Anton Suslov, and Anastasia Selyaninova 2025. 'Technical and analytical report of focus group results and interview findings' (sensitive; 2025). SHAPEDEM-EU Publications.

Primary Data

FG1_Belarus transcript eng final 2024, focus group discussion conducted online by a team of independent Belarusian academics in exile in 2024

FG2_Belarus transcript eng final 2024, focus group discussion conducted online by a team of independent Belarusian academics in exile in 2024

FG3_Belarus transcript eng final 2024, focus group discussion conducted online by a team of independent Belarusian academics in exile in 2024

UA-FG1-CSO 2024, focus group discussion conducted by the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy team and its partners in Ukraine in 2024

UA-FG2-CSO 2024, focus group discussion conducted by the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy team and its partners in Ukraine in 2024

UA-FG3-Media 2024, focus group discussion conducted by the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy team and its partners in Ukraine in 2024

Online surveys on Ukraine'

UA-CJ1-2025 citizen jury in Ukraine

UA-CJ2-2025 citizen jury in Ukraine