SHAPEDEM-EU

Ambitions for the Future of EU Democracy Support

SHAPEDEM-EU Consortium

SHAPEDEM-EU Publications

Table of Contents

1   Introduction

The state of European and international relations has fundamentally changed since the EU kicked off its 'democracy promotion' agenda in the early 1990's. At that time, expectations over democracy's future were high (the End of History-paradigm coined by Francis Fukuyama), and democracy-building in the EU appeared vibrant while the EU positioned itself as a 'normative power'. The assumption was that the Western model of liberal democracy is transferable and attractive for other world regions and that the West needed to disseminate its model externally.

Following increasing tensions between democratic and autocratic trends as well Russia's globally divisive full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the international liberal order appears to be more fragile: the 'West' is fractured and multiple actors have risen to contest the values of Western liberalism. Third party actors include regional powers or international organisations that have to be taken into account when critically assessing the challenges and opportunities for democracy support (e.g., Balfour & Waal 2021; Gawrich & Russo 2017; Gawrich 2017). To adapt to rising geopolitics and waning multilateralism, the EU has constructed narratives of strategic autonomy and European sovereignty which may conflict with global democracy support. Global politics are increasingly framed as a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism (Youngs 2021). Democracy is simultaneously contested in domestic and foreign policy (Góra et al. 2019) and Europe's relative global weight is in decline, signalling that the EU is currently facing an existential challenge to recast its support for democracy against the background of a multi-order world. Meanwhile, the EU maintains an ambition to enhance its 'leadership in promoting and protecting human rights and democracy worldwide' (European Commission 2020, p. 1). This ambition's litmus test is found not least in how the EU supports democratic politics in its neighbouring countries in North Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the South Caucasus. The EU's democracy support in these regions reveals a long-lasting engagement, which originated in the 1990's and was cemented in the founding of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2003. While the ENP primarily sought to establish frames for deeper EU cooperation with Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Syria, and Tunisia in the South and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in the East, it failed to support sustainable democratic transformations (e.g., Huber 2020 for the Southern, Korosteleva 2012 for the Eastern Neighbourhood). The contestation of the EU's democratic politics by its member states poses additional reputational challenges in the neighbourhood, as does its often conflicting objectives between democracy support in neighbouring countries and in pursuing stability concerns (e.g., Soler i Lecha & Woertz 2020).

2   Core SHAPEDEM-EU Ambitions

Against this background, SHAPEDEM-EU sets out to 'rethink, reshape, and review' the EU's policies with an entirely novel approach to the practice of democracy support, while elaborating and pilot testing a Democracy Learning Loop as the basis for an improved policy toolkit. In order to understand the impact of EU policies and contribute to substantial and sustainable improvements in the EU's democracy support agenda, SHAPEDEM-EU re-frames the EU's democracy support as a social practice of interaction (thereby building on the recent practice-turn in international relations scholarship), embedded in a Democracy Learning Loop, which requires the collective democratic learning of all stakeholders in the process by providing new

channels and tools for their interaction. This approach shifts the conceptualisation of democracy support away from seeing the EU's partners as objects of foreign policy and instead puts all actors involved centre stage in the making of a more resilient and responsive EU democracy support agenda in both neighbourhoods.

This innovative method enables SHAPEDEM-EU to take stock, understand, and learn from the developments in the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood countries, which are highly dynamic and diverse. SHAPEDEM-EU considers that countries in both regions have undergone fundamental political changes, triggered by a societal upheaval (the Arab uprisings, the coloured revolutions, Euromaidan, and Velvet Revolution), in reaction to which modest democratic progress (Tunisia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia) appears to coexist with stagnation and the continued persistence or entrenchment of authoritarian rule in both Eastern Europe (Azerbaijan, Belarus), and the Middle East and North Africa (Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and Libya). At the same time, popular mobilisations in both neighbourhoods in the fight for dignity, freedom, sovereignty, and a sense of peoplehood continue. This is accompanied by blossoming civil society initiatives and civic movements. Hence, despite stumbling blocks, democratic trends especially at the grassroots level allow for a more optimistic view (Teti et al. 2020; Buşcaneanu 2016).

In order to address ongoing challenges and threats to democracy, the EU must find a way to reach out to new social movements in both neighbourhoods, which are less connected to international civil society organisations and have less experience with international cooperation. These new movements often go hand in hand with social media-based political mobilisations and do not fit with traditional, institutionalised forms of EU engagement (Youngs 2019); thus, they are not easily accessible through conventional external democracy support strategies. Furthermore, the EU struggles to address these movements as its strategies range between tools of conditionality within its enlargement policy ('old wine in new bottles'), capacity building (funded by the European Neighbourhood Instrument), and local ownership-based approaches (including civil society support, while being aware that some of those organisations are perceived as too dependent on external funds and inadequately represent local preferences).

Although the EU improved its toolkit of democracy support within the ENP, its response to local trends has undoubtedly contributed to limited EU policy impact. SHAPEDEM-EU will offer a fundamental and comprehensive improvement, bringing the range of local democratic knowledge in both neighbourhoods into a more inclusive dialogue with EU institutions, as part of our pilot test of the Democracy Learning Loop.

SHAPEDEM-EU's overall ambition is to build on use of the social science-based 'practice-turn' to more thoroughly reflect upon the dynamic realities in the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods, while understanding democracy support as a practice of interaction (both discursive and behavioural) between the EU and a variety of actors in both neighbourhoods. Our focus on democracy support as a (social) practice discards outdated binary donor-recipient approaches to instead emphasise and empower local needs, ambitions, orders, and visions of a good life as well as the inclusion of vital local voices. SHAPEDEM-EU addresses the very practice of EU democracy support in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods to ensure ongoing mutual, open-ended democratic learning by all relevant stakeholders, in the EU, amongst its member

states, countries neighbouring the EU, as well as the larger international community, to guarantee more credible, legitimate, and effective support for democratic politics. In addition, SHAPEDEM-EU investigates the EU's (democracy support) practices with the neighbourhood in other policy fields (Khakee & Wolff 2021) to seek out their impact on the effectiveness of democracy support. SHAPEDEM-EU selects trade, migration, energy, and security as crucial entangled policy areas. This comprehensive perspective allows us to include practices of contestation beyond the EU's democracy support policies. SHAPEDEM-EU takes contestation as especially high in two unique dimensions of democracy support, which require special attention. Firstly, gender equality as part of the democracy support agenda and, secondly, digital transformations.

3   The EU in the Global Order

The contestation of the concept of 'democracy promotion' began in the early 2000's (Dalacoura 2005), whilst more recently a renewed 'wave of autocratisation' (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019) and the 'contestedness' of democracy itself (Wiener 2014; Berman 2019) require us to rethink democracy and democracy support in the new era which has been described in terms such as 'Westlessness', 'multiplex', multi-ordered', or a 'challenged International Liberal Order' (Bunde et al. 2020; Acharya 2017b; Flockhart 2016; Lake et al. 2021). Observations have, however, been insufficiently linked to the consequences for democracy support, which SHAPEDEM-EU intends to investigate.

Despite the contestation of liberal democracy (e.g., Hobson 2009; Berman 2019; Kurki 2010), research tends to emphasise the EU's normative attractiveness (Neuman 2019). Over the last 30 years, research advancements have shifted the democracy support agenda from export models to bottom-up approaches, which 'facilitate locally generated and rooted forms of change', including from a long-term perspective (Burnell 2010; Carothers 2015).

In particular, scholars have pointed to the EU's rhetoric-practice gap and how Brussels frequently prioritises stability over support for democratic politics in its relations with autocratic regimes (Pace 2009; van Hüllen 2019). Similarly, research has identified the EU's practice-local needs gap (e.g., Michou et al. 2014; Teti et al. 2020) as its liberal market democracy model often disregards localised understandings of democracy in certain countries (Pace 2010; Huber 2020), while risking a strengthening of non-democratic forces (Pikulik & Bedford 2019). Similarly, bottom-up and local perspectives on resilience in the neighbourhoods need to be emphasised in EU approaches in order to advance this declared aim (Flockhart & Korosteleva 2020). Recent research has moreover demonstrated the need to pay closer attention to the agency of domestic actors (Gawrich et al. 2020) and consider more fine-tuned modes of bilateral cooperation built on an equal footing (Gawrich et al. 2019). SHAPEDEM-EU thus seeks to locally contextualise and pluralise democracy as part of the EU's democracy support agenda.

While the local turn is clear in the literature, a new approach has not yet taken hold for practical steps in both academic and policy practice. Larbi Sadiki has pointed out that a localised understanding of democracy 'cannot escape the linguistic, cultural, historical, and power-based facts specific to the host context' (Sadiki 2015b, p. 707). Such an understanding of the EU's democracy support requires self-empowerment of the so-called 'democratisees' (both neighbourhoods) and self-restraint on behalf of

the so-called 'democratisers' (the EU) (Sadiki & Saleh forthcoming, p. 10). To this aim, Sadiki and Saleh have proposed the idea of a Democracy Learning Loop.

4   Three Phases of SHAPEDEM-EU's Work

Against this background, the SHAPEDEM-EU project is committed to generating insights which will contribute to viable and sustainable EU democracy support, greater transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness in the EU's support for democratic politics in its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods, and the empowerment of less heard societal actors in those regions.

In this light, SHAPEDEM-EU pursues three core objectives implemented throughout three concurrent phases:

Phase 1: (Re)Conceptualising Democracy & Democracy Support as Social Practices: This phase grounds fundamental reflections about practices of democracy and democracy support as well as their contestation. These reflections will lead to guiding concepts which will allow for the elaboration of an innovative Democracy Learning Loop applied throughout the project. This helps maximise the EU's democratic knowledge, the empowerment of agents of change, and to guarantee inclusivity and participation. The overarching goals of this first phase include *conceptualising practices of democracy and democracy support, including their contestation as well as laying the conceptual groundwork for the application of a Democracy Learning Loop.*

Phase 2: Empirical Mapping of Democracy Support & Contestation Practices (discursive and behavioural) in the European Neighbourhood: This second phase aims to scrutinise i) practices of local democratic politics in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods, ii) the EU's democracy support practices in both neighbourhoods over the last decade, including the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, iii) member states' practices related to the EU's democracy support, iv) the practices of international organisations and third country actors involved in democracy support or prevention in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods. SHAPEDEM-EU's second concurrent phase is defined by tasks guided by empirical ambitions focused on different groups of actors. These include *taking stock of dynamics in both neighbourhoods, a comprehensive evidence-based investigation of the EU's democracy support practices in both neighbourhoods, evaluating the effects of EU member states' democracy support practices in both neighbourhoods, and lastly assessing the impact of non-EU actors including international organisations and third countries.*

Phase 3: Fostering Action – Synthesis and Policy Recommendations: This third phase will connect epistemic communities of researchers, policy makers in EU institutions and member states, practitioners, civil society representatives, and citizen groups in the EU and its neighbourhoods. Mutual learning will open new channels of interaction and discussions on challenges to democracy support in order to synthesise findings and produce tangible lessons for future EU interactions with its neighbours. SHAPEDEM-EU will develop workable policies to advise the EU on how to reach for a more effective EU democracy support toolkit, improving its capacities to react to potential gaps and to consider consequences of democracy support policies. We will achieve this by a pilot testing of the Democracy Learning Loop as an innovative tool of democracy support practices between the EU and both neighbourhoods. In doing so, we will transform lessons learned into policy suggestions and build resilient networks and experiences beyond the project's duration. The third phase of the SHAPEDEM-

EU project sets out to accomplish seven different objectives. *These include: i) synthesising the results of the empirical actor-focused stocktaking in the construction of a Democracy Support Digital Dashboard; ii) developing and applying new & innovative channels of interaction these actor groups; iii) providing a set of innovative policy tools for an improved EU democracy support practices; iv) pilot testing the Democracy Learning Loop; v) delivering a synthesis and policy review of the Democracy Learning Loop; vi) disseminating the project's results to the wider public, policy makers and societal audiences; and finally vii) ensuring the sustainability of SHAPEDEM-EU's working results beyond the project's duration.*

In addition, throughout all three phases, SHAPEDEM-EU addresses **two major cross-cutting challenges** at the core of the EU's foreign policy agenda, which impact democracy support and contestation practices: gender equality and digital transformations. The project sets out to meet these challenges by exploring their impact *on EU democracy support practices, identifying the success factors and barriers to the EU's support for democratic political change in both neighbourhoods, and integrating these themes within SHAPEDEM-EU's Democracy Learning Loop.*

SHAPEDEM-EU's main ambition is to contribute to innovative democracy support practices of interaction between the EU and its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods (Korosteleva et al. 2014) by developing a Democracy Learning Loop and rooting it – and its related non-Eurocentric concepts (e.g., Balfour 2021) - in the social practice literature to provide an improved EU toolkit to support democratic politics in its neighbourhoods. Feedback loops have remained at the margins of international relations studies. The policy learning literature has identified two types of loop-based learning: single-loop learning which leads to procedural modification to achieve fixed policy objectives and double-based learning in which rules, norms, and objectives are rethought (Ladi & Tsarouhas 2020). SHAPEDEM-EU advances a multidimensional notion of shared democratic learning throughout practices of democracy support between the EU and its neighbours. This, however, requires mutual trust and a shared social capital (Sadiki & Saleh forthcoming) in a relationship characterised by unequal power relations. While applying social practice theories (Adler & Pouliot 2011) to frame our idea of democracy support, we innovatively incorporate Sadiki and Salesh's loop conceptualisation to pilot test a Democracy Learning Loop as a practical model for the EU to apply in its support for democratic politics.

Practices are understood as 'socially meaningful patterns of action [which] simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world' (Adler & Pouliot 2011, p. 4). SHAPEDEM-EU considers practices to be 'social actions' (Jonas et al. 2017) and 'routinised types of behaviour' (Reckwitz 2002, p. 249; Adler-Nissen 2016), which in international relations 'has more to do with situated micro-processes than abstract resources and capabilities' (Bremberg 2016, p. 426;). In parallel, we also investigate the EU's democratic practices in other policy fields, namely trade, migration, energy, and security (Khakee & Wolff 2021).

SHAPEDEM-EU goes beyond the state of the art by developing a Democracy Learning Loop as a tool for shared democratic learning between the EU and ENP countries. This enables a more 'adaptive (open ended) approach to the question of democratisation' (Sadiki & Saleh forthcoming, p. 5). SHAPEDEM-EU imbues its Democracy Learning Loop with notions of social practices of support and contestation as joint efforts in other policy fields.

Based on the foregoing overview, SHAPEDEM-EU's expected outcomes will be threefold:

- At the scientific level, SHAPEDEM-EU will contribute to academic debates on the legitimacy and efficiency of international democracy support. SHAPEDEM-EU advances an integrated and holistic approach by assessing new insecurities in consolidated democracies that weaken democracy support.

- At the policy level, SHAPEDEM-EU's ambition is to gather an empirical base on the challenges and conflicting objectives in the EU's democracy support among other foreign policy priorities. Using this evidence, the consortium provides empirically-based recommendations to establish a practical Democracy Learning Loop.

- At the societal level, SHAPEDEM-EU intends to go beyond the prevalent binary recipient-sender model of democracy support to incorporate societal stakeholders at a broader, multi-dimensional scale. SHAPEDEM-EU creates new sustainable spaces for dialogue to include bottom-up voices in a Democracy Learning Loop and empowers local actors and agents of change.

5 SHAPEDEM-EU's Integrated Analytical Design

SHAPEDEM-EU establishes **an innovative model of democracy support** by implementing a **Democracy Learning Loop** that surpasses existing democracy support strategies. The project elaborates an analytical design to evaluate the EU's past efforts and provide a policy toolkit for the EU to pursue **legitimate** and **effective democracy support practices that empower citizens** in its neighbouring countries. By conceptualising democracy support as a **social practice**, the EU's policies are perceived as democratic practices in themselves. The implementation of a process of **ongoing, mutual, and open-ended democratic learning** by all stakeholders within EU activities can help the EU meet the challenges of the next decade in its relations with the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods.

SHAPEDEM-EU's integrated analytical design builds upon **four** directly connected **conceptual pillars, three phases**, and **two cross-cutting challenges**.
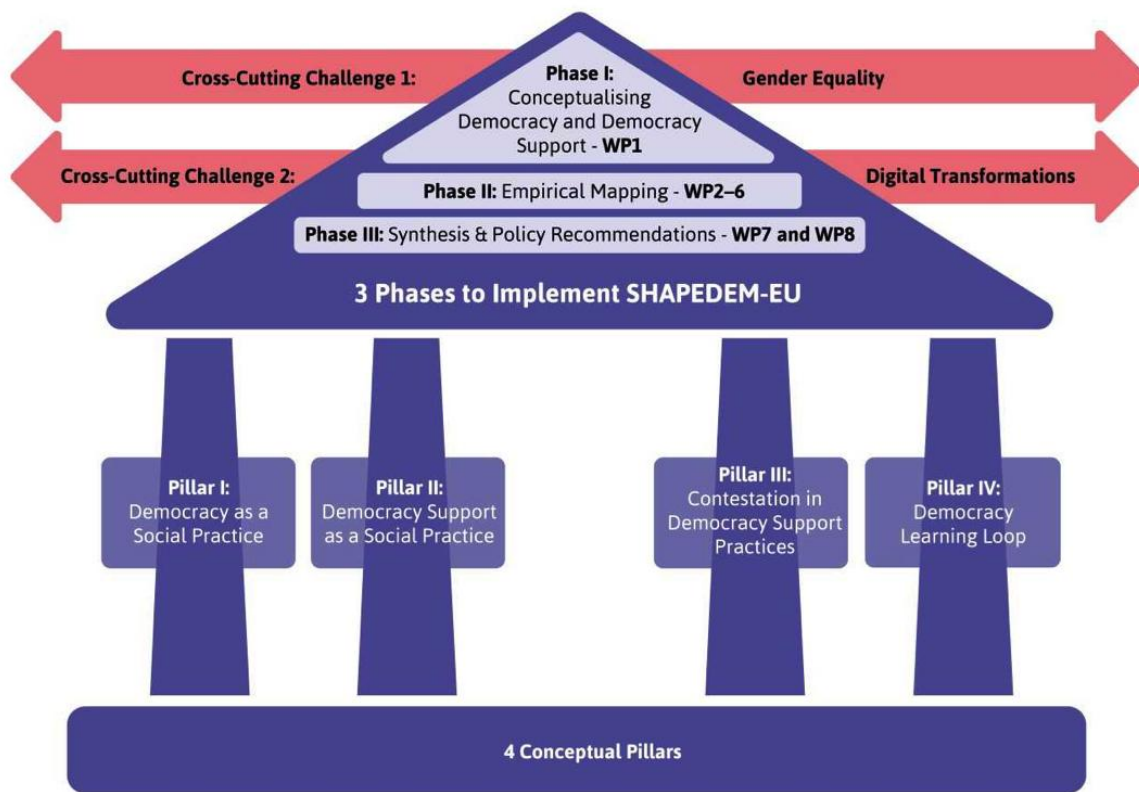
5.1   Four Conceptual Pillars

Figure 1: SHAPEDEM-EU's Conceptual Pillars

Pillar I: Democracy as a social practice based on democratic knowledge. The basis of Pillar I, SHAPEDEM-EU introduces a concept of democracy (within the EU and both neighbourhoods) as a *localised social practice* (Adler-Nissen 2016; Adler & Pouliot 2011) whereby each society has its (broad, narrow, hidden, visible) local system of **democratic knowledge** (Sadiki 2015b, p. 703). SHAPEDEM-EU emphasises the EU's need to **pluralise, localise, and contextualise its understanding of democracy**, as neither '*democratisation nor democratic knowledge is a given. Both are knowable within contexts of history, geography, language, culture, and power relations, local and global*' (Sadiki 2015a, p. 688). SHAPEDEM-EU avoids a prescriptive notion of democracy, yet relies on basic democratic norms enshrined in international law to ensure respect for the rule of law and human rights (especially those guaranteed by UN treaties and the European Convention on Human Rights). This pillar distinguishes between the *procedural* dimensions of democracy (e.g., rule of law, participation, competition, accountability, transparency, inclusion, integrity, and deliberation) and *substance*-related dimensions of democracy (e.g., respect for civil and political freedoms, human rights, the implementation of political equality and responsiveness) (Diamond 2016, 35ff.). This conceptual pillar of democracy applies to peoplehood, civil society, and electoral, liberal, and participative democracy to contextualise how it is practised *locally*. Moreover, we underline the resilience of democratic norms in our concept to highlight neighbourhood societies' ability to resist and adapt to crises.

Pillar II: Democracy support as a social practice of interaction. We conceptualise the EU's democracy support policy as a *practice of interaction*. Pillar II innovatively transfers the practice approach **to the**

10

EU's democracy support toolkit. SHAPEDEM-EU accordingly studies EU democracy support practices by identifying **micro-processes** of interaction *and* **routinised behaviour**, which reveal success factors and barriers. The EU's interaction with its neighbouring countries is a **discursive** (e.g., discourses in the EURO-NEST parliamentary assembly) and **behavioural practice** (e.g., funding strategies according to the EU's more-for-more principle) (Adler-Nissen 2016; Korosteleva et al. 2014). Practices of EU democracy support are shaped at the working level by actors '*who construct, perform, and resist the EU on a daily basis'* (Adler-Nissen 2016, p. 99). Therefore, SHAPEDEM-EU scrutinises the practices of a variety of actors who shape these interactions inside the EU (e.g., the Commission, the European External Action Service, the European Parliament, and the Council), among its member states (state officials and civil society groups), in both neighbourhoods (state officials, civil society representatives, and citizens), and from a range of global and regional actors (states and international organisations). Moreover, Pillar II includes EU interactions in other policy fields in order to comprehensively understand democracy support in the larger context of the EU's relations with its neighbouring countries. The areas of trade and migration as well as energy and security show a high level of mutual dependency and have a crucial bearing on the viability of democracy support.

Pillar III: The practice of multi-layered contestation within the EU's democracy support toolkit. SHAPEDEM-EU conceptualises the role of contestation as the '*discursive and critical engagement with norms of governance* (Wiener 2014, p. 3) and inherent to practices of democracy and democracy support in both neighbourhoods as well as inside the EU (Petrova & Pospieszna 2021; Poppe & Wolff 2017). Pillar III considers the practice of contestation against the background of global competition in the current era of a multi-order world, in which western '*liberal modernity [is] only a part of what is on offer'* (Acharya 2017a, p. 277) and in which re-autocratisation is observed in various world regions (Lührmann et al. 2019; Diamond 2021). Pillar III explains contestation as a *'meta-organising principle of governance in the global realm'* (Wiener 2014, p. 3), which can be seen in the contestation of *essential norms* at the macro level (e.g., the norms of democracy or gender equality, Zielonka & Rupnik 2020), of *principles* of interaction at the meso-level (e.g., on the sub-types of political order, like decentralisation, Poppe & Wolff 2017), and *procedures* at the micro-level (e.g., specific EU funding programmes for democracy support).

Pillar IV: SHAPEDEM-EU's Democracy Learning Loop for an improved EU policy toolkit. We conceptualise the **process of ongoing mutual democratic learning** (related to Sadiki's understanding of localised democratic knowledge) whereby knowledge 'flows in all directions' (Carothers & Brown 2021) as our Democracy Learning Loop. Pillar IV transfers insights on **increased legitimacy and credibility of democracy support** in order to strengthen practices of democratic politics in the upcoming decade. This mutual learning process can feed into democratic practices within EU institutions and member states. Pillar IV conceptualises a **Democracy Learning Loop** as a social practice for shared democratic learning between the EU and its neighbouring countries.

5.2   SHAPEDEM-EU's Methodological Approach

SHAPEDEM-EU's analytical design will be implemented through a set of mixed-methods to: i) Broadly collect data on local political developments in the countries of the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods, on EU and EUMS-level contestation and policies, as well as on the role of global actors, and ii) conduct a pilot test of a Democracy Learning Loop for the EU to adopt in its future policy

making. Our methods aim to collect and evaluate data, which will enhance the EU's democracy support toolkit in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods.

The variety of SHAPEDEM-EU's methods will ensure the **collection of high quality, reliable, and comparable data on democracy, democracy support, and contestation practices** in the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods, which our consortium is uniquely positioned to implement. Our methods will contribute to results that introduce **a new way of thinking** about effectively supporting democratic politics, a sustainable Democracy Learning Loop, and an improved policy toolkit for the EU. Our methodological ambition is, among others, to accentuate new voices among actors in EU democracy support.

The composition of the SHAPEDEM-EU consortium enables it to conduct a pilot test of the **Democracy Learning Loop** within its own team. The Democracy Learning Loop will be implemented using theory-guided methods in its analytical design to deliver *conceptual*, *empirical*, and *action-fostering insights*.

The Democracy Learning Loop is defined by all stakeholders' i) **willingness** to understand democracy support as an **open-ended journey** in which all actors contribute to a **permanent learning process**, ii) **readiness** to invest time and capacities in **mutual** democratic **learning**, and iii) **responsiveness** to translate the lessons learned regarding **pluralised, localised, and contextualised practices of democracy** into action. Furthermore, it is sensitive to the context of power relationships in which the Democracy Learning Loop evolves and is perceived as multidimensional, thus moving from uni- or bi-dimensional learning towards an inclusiveness of the multitude of actors involved.

These **four conceptual pillars** will allow SHAPEDEM-EU to pursue its objectives and ambitions within three phases of the consortium's work. These phases are mutually informing, ensure the exchange of information amongst the Work Packages, and facilitate the shift from ideas to practice in terms of empirically-based policy recommendations for an improved EU democracy support toolkit.

6   Implementing SHAPEDEM-EU's Three Phases

6.1   Phase I: Conceptualising democracy & democracy support as social practices

Phase I in SHAPEDEM-EU will provide an **analytical framework** for the ensuing empirical analyses by converting the **four pillars** into grounded working concepts. This will be realised by theorising **democracy and democracy support as social practices** in times of **multi-layered contestation**. Scientific debates will be scrutinised to shed light on democratic trends, emerging forms of democratic practices, new societal actors, and new social movements. The concept of democracy has normative connotations, referring to an *imagined society* wherein all citizens of a polity share equal political (including rule of law, political expression, and rights of communities), economic, social, and civil rights. This normative imagination requires scholars and practitioners to focus on *actual* practices of democracy, which is based on differing norms and traditions, revealing a tension between the normative ideal of democracy and its practices (e.g., in the field of gender equality). Such conditions call for a theory-guided, nuanced reflection, and an understanding of democracy as a contested norm and of support for democratic politics as a disputed international *practice*. Our innovative framework will guide future EU support practices for locally contextualised concepts of peoplehood, civil society, and electoral, liberal and participative democracy as there has been a lack of deliberation on the alternative models generated by local preferences and perceptions (Maduro & Kahn 2020). Shifting

global constellations, increased scepticism, and resistance to democracy support (Del Sarto & Tholens 2020) present challenges to '**rejuvenating democracy promotion'** (Carothers & Brown 2021). The increasing emphasis (in both academic and practitioner debates) on peoplehood in any democratisation process is fundamental (Sadiki 2014).

Since societies in the EU and its neighbourhood are exposed to increasing global challenges and shocks in a rapidly changing world, we will assess the EU's foreign policy paradigm to support **resilience**, defined as '*the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstand and recover from internal and external crises*' (European External Action Service 2016), a core component of the EU's 2016 Global Strategy (Tocci 2020) and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Our understanding perceives resilience as a necessary quality for democratic local communities to become sustainable in the face of adversity or crisis (Flockhart & Korosteleva 2020). Within this phase, SHAPEDEM-EU conceptualises how to implement an innovative **Democracy Learning Loop** within the EU's democracy support practices that ensures mutual democratic learning in a new and challenging era.

The overarching goals of SHAPEDEM-EU's Phase I include, firstly conceptualising practices of democracy and democracy support, as well as of their contestation, and secondly, laying the conceptual groundwork for the application of a Democracy Learning Loop.

6.2 Phase II: Empirical mapping of democracy support practices in the European neighbourhood

Phase II will conduct a **rigorous stocktaking** of developments in the EU's support of democratic politics in its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods by employing a **multi-actor approach**. SHAPEDEM-EU will investigate the political and social dynamics in countries neighbouring the EU. In addition, it will conduct a comprehensive collection and analysis of EU institutions' as well as EU member states' practices. The contributions of third country actors and international organisations in support (or contestation) of democracy will also be assessed. SHAPEDEM-EU maps two dimensions of democracy support by studying the actors' **discursive practices**, e.g., (related) essential narratives, and by examining **behavioural practices** through an identification of patterns of interaction. This multi-actor mapping will provide extensive empirical evidence as well as critical assessments for future EU policies in this field.

6.2.1 Practices of democratic politics in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods

The European Neighbourhood includes countries wherein regimes represent a full spectrum of the democracy-autocracy scale. There are indications – in the East and South – of façade institutions aimed at explicitly meeting external actors' requirements without true democratic reform (Balfour et al. 2020; Terzyan 2020; Grewal 2021). These developments challenge our conventional assumptions and require a **locally contextualised understanding** of **democracy** (Kurki 2013) as local perceptions of democracy in both regions often differ from what the EU intends to export (van Hüllen 2015; Buşcaneanu 2016; Pace 2010). Although basic freedoms and rights are less contested, local preferences regarding the type of society people would like to live in and the type of government they prefer to be governed by are highly diverse (e.g., Schumacher et al. 2017). Hence, the majority within these societies does not contest democracy as such, but it does contest the ambiguous nature of EU democracy support and its practices.

While *first* pursuing a comprehensive **stocktaking of local developments** in both neighbourhoods, SHAPEDEM-EU *secondly*, elaborates on local practices of democracy (discursive and behavioural) to identify **success factors and barriers** to democratisation. *Thirdly*, SHAPEDEM-EU identifies what **local agents of change** think about the EU's (discursive and behavioural) democracy support practices and how they wish to shape future democratic practices of interaction between the EU and ENP countries. We will map the role of domestic actors' preferences and practices in advancing democratic politics or limiting democratisation.

Methodologically, this approach is rooted in **comparative case study analyses**. SHAPEDEM-EU's **case country selection** adopts a **most similar systems** design for **six in-depth cases** as well as a broader stocktaking in both neighbourhoods. We apply this selection technique for 'cases that are similar on a wide range of explanatory variables but different on the value of the dependent variable' (Levy 2008, p. 10), and employ a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. The **general parameters** are based on: i) **sub-regional distribution** (South Caucasus, Eastern Europe, the Mashreq, and the Maghreb); ii) considerable **local contestation** of political systems in the last decade; iii) substantial **societal participation** in democratic politics; iv) presence of some democratic **institutions** (consolidated authoritarian countries are excluded); v) substantial **depth of relations with the EU and some of the EU's member states**; vi) observable influence of **third countries and other international organisations**.

Our in-depth case selection technique allows SHAPEDEM-EU to map particularities in *how*, *why,* and *for which purposes* the EU practices democracy support in both neighbourhoods as well as the involvement of key EU member states and external non-EU actors. In all six countries, SHAPEDEM-EU studies local democratic dynamics, EU democracy support practices and their impact on local democratic practices or on practices of contestation. This choice of case countries enables us to inquire into diverse EU practices in light of democratic politics and in these contexts, to understand how these in turn affect local politics and interact with member states and external actors' practices within these domains. It also helps us to work together within the larger **Democracy Learning Loop** which connects all Work Packages and necessarily focuses on cases where EU engagement is comparatively substantial and its practices sufficiently thick.

In the **Eastern Neighbourhood,** the three case countries from the Eastern Partnership (EaP) are **Ukraine**, **Georgia**, and **Armenia,** which fall within the aforementioned general parameters. **Ukraine** is of high geostrategic relevance for the EU and has experienced dynamic pro-democratic, authoritarian, and pro-EU revolutionary episodes. It benefits from its Association Agreement with the EU as well as from several EU donor programmes. The EU's practices of interaction focus on the increase of democratisation as well as the fight against systemic corruption and the hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine. **Georgia**'s level of cooperation with the EU is similar to Ukraine; it is highly ambitious about meeting the EU's expectations, demonstrates considerable democratic advances, and is a country where the EU enjoys a high degree of legitimacy. Nevertheless, its territorial disputes and the recent legal and physical clashes impede Georgia's political stability. **Armenia** is less integrated with the EU and pursued a pathway of regional integration towards the (Russia-led) Eurasian Economic Union. After the 2018 Velvet Revolution, this was followed by pro-democratic movements and considerable instabilities. We will explore an **additional flexible pool of country** cases to map specific regional success factors (**Moldova**) or authoritarian barriers to democracy support practices (**Azerbaijan** and **Belarus**).

In the **Southern Neighbourhood**, the three case countries of **Lebanon**, **Palestine**, and **Tunisia** all fall within the general parameters of our case selection technique. **Lebanon's** political system has stagnated as an existential economic crisis strains the country. It has benefited from EU donor programmes in support of civil society and democratisation; however, this democratic progress has gradually been hollowed out by a ruling class characterised by corruption and a lack of accountability. **Palestine** continues to exist under decades-old occupation and the EU's and member states' donor programmes mainly serve to consolidate this status quo, as well as the Palestinian Authority's non-democratic and corrupt practices. There is substantial multi-layered contestation in society towards a variety of external actors, especially the EU as the largest donor. EU member states diverge substantially in their policies. Other external actors include the US as the main player, as well as the UN, Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey, amongst others. **Tunisia** has benefited from intense cooperation with the EU and some member states following the outbreak of the Tunisian revolution in 2011. While political and institutional advancements have been noticeable, the economic situation has further deteriorated. Although the EU's democracy support practices signal a lack of inclusivity and sustainability, these did not lead to a major overhaul of its toolkit. Meanwhile, Tunisia has been under growing pressures due to geopolitical competition by key regional players (in particular the Gulf countries) and the spillover of insecurity from the Libyan conflict. Recently, political developments have put the country's democratic future in doubt. For a broader regional perspective, we will explore an **additional flexible pool of case countries** to map other cases of substantial (Jordan & Morocco), limited (Egypt) and low (Algeria) EU engagement in order to further elaborate on specific success factors or barriers to democracy support. In these **additional cases**, the level of engagement of external actors varies, and popular protests thus far have had comparatively limited effects (Morocco, Jordan, Algeria) while the situation in Egypt has shifted from some promising moves towards democratisation (2011-13) towards an increasingly fierce autocracy (since 2013).

The focus of these neighbourhood-focused activities is to i) take stock of democracy-related dynamics in both neighbourhoods; ii) conduct a comprehensive evidence-based investigation of the EU's (discursive and behavioural) democracy support practices in both neighbourhoods in the last decade as well as a review of relevant parts of the EU's Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy; iii) take stock of the effects of EU member states' democracy support practices in both neighbourhoods; and iv) assess the impact of non-EU actors including international organisations and third countries.

6.2.2 Comprehensive mapping of the EU's democratic practices and practices of democracy support in its neighbourhoods

SHAPEDEM-EU aims to examine EU democracy support and democratic practices in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods. It will map and evaluate the EU's **democracy support narratives, policies, and instruments** in the context of its larger foreign policy vis-à-vis its neighbouring countries. The overall goal is to assess if and which democratic norms permeate larger European foreign policy practices and to which effect these practices are contested in our six case countries. EU democracy support is typically assessed with a focus on the EU's model of democracy and the respective instruments devised by the EU to support democracy, thereby studying how these are successfully (or not) enacted vis-à-vis its neighbours. Our perspective, however, innovatively investigates how democratic practices are visible within the EU's democracy support policies *and* permeate (or not) in other areas of foreign policy (trade and migration as well as energy and security). Although the EU has

formally recognised the need for **less paternalistic strategies** to engage with different models of democracy and to give local actors more of a say within democracy support practices, the EU's priorities also conflict with its geopolitical objectives (e.g., security issues, border management, migration policies and arms trade), thereby sending **mixed signals** to local societies (see e.g., Sikkink 2007). More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed public health issues to the forefront of EU foreign policy objectives, deprioritising democracy support.

SHAPEDEM-EU will provide a comprehensive **mapping** of EU democracy support practices within a matrix of larger foreign policies. Insights on how the EU's democracy support **toolkit** has evolved in the **last decade** will account for an improved understanding of practices of key **EU institutions** including the **Commission**, **Parliament**, and **the Council** as well as the **External Action Service** and **EU delegations** in all six **case countries**. The **data** SHAPEDEM-EU **collects** include the EU's project-funding instruments, mechanisms for dialogue, restrictive measures (including sanctions) adopted as well as other EU decisions, impacting on democratic politics in the neighbourhoods. This will enable us to identify the larger policy context in which the **Democracy Learning Loop** evolves (in terms of contestation among EU institutions & of EU policies) and seeks to impact. Furthermore, the collected data contributes to **SHAPEDEM-EU's** interactive **Democracy Support Digital Dashboard** which aims to **visualise trends** in the EU's democracy support practices, especially its policy instruments and funding mechanisms.

The goals of these EU-centred activities include a comprehensive evidence-based investigation of the EU's (discursive and behavioural) democracy support practices in both neighbourhoods in the last decade as well as a review of relevant parts of the EU's Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy.

6.2.3   Mapping of selected EU member states' democracy support practices in the EU neighbourhoods

The EU's democracy support practices are also shaped by **member states' diverse interests** in the EU's neighbourhoods with major disparities in priorities, geographical directions, engagement, and conceptions that often clash with the EU's priorities (Godfrey & Youngs 2019). Although there is a consensus on the overarching objectives of EU democracy support (e.g., Grimm 2015), some EU members are interested in denser ties, stability, and democratisation in the South, whereas most Central-Eastern members want closer relations with the East. Meanwhile, France is especially engaged in the MENA region whereas Poland and Sweden are active in the Eastern Partnership. Others do not show a particular interest in the ENP, such as Ireland and Portugal.

The picture is complicated by waves of Euroscepticism and nationalist populism that undermine liberal democracy *within* the EU, which goes hand in hand with EU member states' (EUMS) increased reluctance to adhere to binding EU rules. This impacts the EUMS' foreign policy discourses and their position on the EU's democracy support (Heinisch et al. 2020; Zielonka & Rupnik 2020; Petrova & Pospieszna 2021). However, from SHAPEDEM-EU's perspective, this internal EU democracy 'crisis' could also serve as a learning mechanism to improve the EU's external practices of democracy support, especially considering the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic which can be both positive and negative for the future of democracy (e.g., Fukuyama 2020). Our perspective allows us to link EU internal developments with SHAPEDEM-EU's **Democracy Learning Loop**.

The picture is complicated by **societal groups** in a number of EU countries, which mobilise to demand more accountability, transparency, effectiveness, and trustworthiness. Besides the most prominent *Fridays for Future* movement, there are considerably impactful anti-racist, anti-corruption, or pro-rule-of-law movements in a number of EU countries. Although their immediate impact on the EU's external practices of democracy support might not be directly identifiable, they can bolster the legitimacy of EU democracy support in the ENP and spur the development of positive discursive and behavioural democratic practices outside the EU. As civil society organisations are widely acknowledged as important actors in democracy support, SHAPEDEM-EU's analytical framework also covers those organisations supporting the EU's democracy support agenda as well as those who contest it.

SHAPEDEM-EU will **map democracy support practices as well as their contestation** via a **sample** of significant **EU member states** vis-à-vis both neighbourhoods. These are Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, Sweden, and Denmark. We will provide in-depth analysis of state institutions and a selection of civil-society actors involved in practices of democracy support. In doing so, SHAPEDEM-EU intends to contribute to the EU's learning curve of how to overcome multi-layered contestation in its practices of democracy support. The data collected will contribute to **SHAPEDEM-EU's** extensive interactive **Democracy Support Digital Dashboard.**

The primary objective of these actions regarding EU member states is to take stock of their democracy support practices in the neighbourhoods.

6.2.4   Impact of non-EU actors on democracy support practices in the EU's neighbourhoods

The EU's democracy support practices in its neighbouring countries are situated in a web of actors, in a complex array of multiple modernities. The liberal international order, built upon free trade, effective multilateralism, democratisation, and liberal values is increasingly contested. Both the USA and Europe are seeing their democracy support practices contested at home and abroad against the backdrop of increased 'Westlessness' in the international order (Bunde et al. 2020). However, looking back to the former international order, to asymmetries, dependencies as well as to contestation of the legitimacy of the 'Western' order, its uncontested nature was always an idealised picture of reality. The exposure of this myth-like perspective has contributed to the perception of the world as 'multiplex' and 'multi-order', characterised by the proliferation of a number of influential actors, new competitions among rivals, and the lack of a global hegemon (Acharya 2014, 2015, 2017a). As Flockhart puts it, the emerging multi-order world is characterised by a complexity of new and traditional relationships, each triggered by shared identities or priorities within those multiple orders (Flockhart 2016). Such a changing global setting also affects the interest and policy tools of international actors to cooperate or compete in the countries of the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods.

SHAPEDEM-EU will provide a well-grounded understanding of the **vision** and **capacities** of non-EU external actions in **support of democracy**, **democracy prevention**, or **autocracy promotion** in both neighbourhoods. Therefore, we assess and map international organisations and third countries' priorities, policies, and tools involved in democracy support and prevention in both regions as well as their relations with the EU as partners, competitors, or adversaries. The international organisations (IOs) include the UN, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, NATO, the League of Arab States and the African Union, while third country actors include the US, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, Turkey, and Saudi

Arabia. This will help us identify how external actors might be part of the **Democracy Learning Loop** or substantially impede it.

The ambition of these activities is to assess the impact of non-EU actors including international organisations and third countries.

6.3   Phase III: Fostering Action – Synthesis & policy recommendations

Phase III will synthesise our theoretical **conceptualisation of practices of democracy and democracy support** in an age of multi-layered **contestation** based on the comprehensive stocktaking and data compiled related to SHAPEDEM-EU's: i) *six case countries,* ii) *key EU institutions,* iii) *selected EU member states,* and iv) *3rd actors (IOs & third countries)* across its actor-centred activities. Based on these findings, SHAPEDEM-EU will provide a detailed assessment of success factors and barriers for the EU's (and other actors') democracy support practices in the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods, including a review of the *EU's Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024*. SHAPEDEM-EU's distinctive and original contribution is to unpack how the array of domestic and EU actors cope with the EU's democracy support practices and to provide access to an interactive visual comprehensive map in the form of a **Democracy Support Digital Dashboard**. SHAPEDEM-EU will identify new and sustainable ways to improve the EU's democracy support toolkit based on our innovative and sustainable **Democracy Learning Loop** and the paradigm of entangled democratic learning between the neighbourhoods and the EU. SHAPEDEM-EU plans to **pilot test** this Democracy Learning Loop throughout the project phase to observe and nuance its conceptual framework in practice.

By synthesising our insights based on data collection and interactive methods of exchange with both neighbourhoods as part of the Democracy Learning Loop, SHAPEDEM-EU will provide a policy-oriented set of **recommendations for enhanced** and **context-specific democracy support practices**, for facilitating democratic learning, improved practices of democracy support, and for a revamped **EU democracy support toolkit**.

The overarching goals of SHAPEDEM-EU's Phase III includes i) Synthesising the results of the stocktaking efforts; ii) developing and applying new & innovative channels of interaction between local actors in both neighbourhoods, EU institutions and EU member states; iii) providing a set of innovative policy tools which contribute to overhaul EU democracy support practices; pilot-testing of the Democracy Learning Loop as a continual task of SHAPEDEM-EU's work; deliver a synthesis & policy review of the Democracy Learning Loop; iv) ensuring the dissemination of project results amongst the wider public, policy makers and societal audiences; and v) safeguarding the sustainability of SHAPEDEM-EU's working results beyond the project's duration.
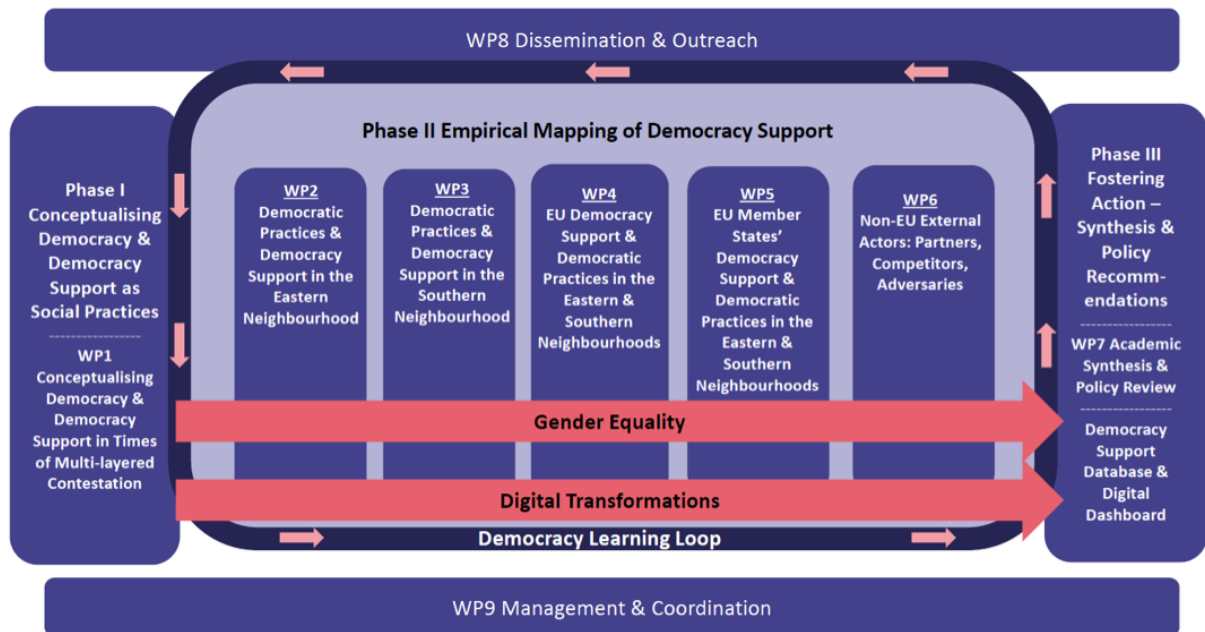
Figure 2: SHAPEDEM-EU's Work Package Structure

7 Two Cross-Cutting Challenges

SHAPEDEM-EU's activities intend to apply an **integrated perspective** on two highly dynamic and contested cross-cutting challenges, which SHAPEDEM-EU perceives to be of focal relevance to democratisation and autocratisation alike. The challenges of **gender equality & digital transformations** reflect inherent threats to EU democracy support.

7.1 Gender Equality

As part of the EU's democracy support practices in both neighbourhoods, gender equality poses a significant challenge for the EU due to substantial **contestation**, especially on gender-transformative or intersectional perspectives.

SHAPEDEM-EU regards gender equality as a core component of democratic practices and democracy support. We perceive gender equality as integral to our analytical design and designate it a cross-cutting challenge to be investigated throughout all phases of the project. Gender equality is a necessary criterion for amassing sufficient democratic knowledge, which forms the basis for inclusive and effective democracy support tools. SHAPEDEM-EU builds on the EU's commitment contained within its EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 as well as its ambition as expressed in its **EU Gender Action Plan III (2021-2025)**, complementing the **EU's LGBTQI equality strategy** and related to **SDG 5** on gender equality. SHAPEDEM-EU is equipped to pursue gender mainstreaming and to implement targeted actions as well as gender-related political dialogue as part of its consortium activities. The centrality of the issue carries implications for our conceptualisation of democratic practices in inclusive societies, the methods we employ to collect and evaluate data, as well as for our pilot testing of a Democracy Learning Loop. Our conceptualisations of democracy, democracy support, and contestation as social practices also require a gender-responsive perspective on all manner of interactions, referring to those between EU institutions, local societies, and policy makers in the

19

neighbourhood as well as to SHAPEDEM-EU's research methods and our practices within the consortium's work.

The especially contested issue of LGBTQI rights in some of the EUMS as well as in a range of world regions further complicates the challenge of implementing gender equality in practices of democracy support. The EU's gender strategy might not only meet with regional and national opposition, but also clash with the political agenda of other third country actors' ambitions to practice democracy prevention in both regions (e.g., from Russia, China, Saudi Arabia), while also considering intersectional aspects. This presents a special challenge to SHAPEDEM-EU's conceptualisation of a **Democracy Learning Loop**, founded in the ambition to apply more recent conceptualisations of democracy support, built on joint democratic learning by all actors involved (Sadiki & Saleh forthcoming) and hence in which democratic learning is expected to flow 'in all directions' (Carothers & Brown 2021).

SHAPEDEM-EU is aware of the obstacles, which might occur in implementing the cross-cutting challenge of gender equality since gender equality paradigms are contested by a considerable number of actors we intend to approach. This poses a particular challenge because gender inequality in certain contexts often goes hand in hand with human rights violations (e.g., through homophobia and discrimination of LGBTQI-related rights). To ensure our steadfast commitment to gender-related issues, SHAPEDEM-EU not only sets gender-sensitive and gender-responsive standards throughout its own work, but creates a specific tool to promote this topic as we will create **six JLU-funded Gender Equality Fellowships** (each for one month and three per neighbourhood) to be stationed at CEF in Brussels. The fellowships will, *first*, give civil society representatives from both neighbourhoods a voice in Brussels, *second*, provide safe environments for fellows to engage in an open exchange with EU actors, *third*, allow for greater representation in SHAPEDEM-EU's empirical mapping, and *fourth*, open up direct communication channels between fellows and EU institutions. Moreover, the fellows will ensure that the Democracy Learning Loop does not overlook gender equality issues as the flow of information takes place directly between stakeholder groups. By implementing these fellowships at different intervals, SHAPEDEM-EU thus ensures that the gender dimension is addressed throughout the entirety of its duration.

Gender equality featured prominently in the EU's recently identified foreign policy priorities in the *Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in External Action 2021-2025.* The EU's own commitment is thus elevated although it did not constitute an essential component of previous agendas of democracy support. SHAPEDEM-EU acknowledges the perception gaps and highly diverse social practices both within EU member states and the societies of both neighbourhoods in this regard.

Therefore, the challenge of gender equality poses the most crucial part of the feasibility test of SHAPEDEM-EU's **Democracy Learning Loop**. SHAPEDEM-EU intends to address first, the noteworthy level of contestation, second, the required minimisation of risks in pursuing dialogue on the topic, and third, the maximisation of impact through direct dialogue with and amongst EU institutions by establishing **six Gender Equality Fellowships** (funded by the co-ordinating institution JLU) based in Brussels in order to foster the flow of information between EU institutions and civil society actors from both neighbourhoods in a safe and free environment.

7.2   Digital Transformations

Digital channels of communication have become essential for transparency, public participation, and accountability in all processes of **democratisation** (e.g., Pirannejad 2017) as could be seen in the '*Facebook-inspired uprisings across the globe'* (Berman 2019), including the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods. At the same time, digital practices create new mechanisms for **authoritarian control** and opportunities to spread disinformation, all the while eroding societal trust in state institutions and the EU and other external actors in democracies and autocracies alike (e.g., Głowacka et al. 2021; European Parliamentary Research Service 2018). The EU itself aims to **make digital transformations work for people and businesses** and so digital channels represent a '**double edged-sword**' of societal and political communication as the basis for democratisation and any free society (Garside 2020).

SHAPEDEM-EU takes stock of digital practices (as success factors of or barriers to democratisation) while scrutinising local democratic politics in both neighbourhoods, the EU and its member states' practices of democracy support as well as the 3rd actors supporting or preventing democracy in both neighbourhoods. As part of SHAPEDEM-EU's Democracy Learning Loop, we explore comprehensive mechanisms to include digital practices in the Democracy Learning Loop in order to expand the EU's policy options and provide a **Democracy Support Digital Dashboard**.

8   Envisioned Impact of the SHAPEDEM-EU Project

The composition of SHAPEDEM-EU's members as well as its research objectives are designed with the ultimate objective to maximise its impact in **rejuvenating the EU's democracy support practices**. This will be carried out in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods through the **Democracy Learning Loop**, **Democracy Support Database**, and **Digital Dashboard**. The integrated analytical design will be implemented to generate results which address specific stakeholder groups involved in democratic politics in the neighbourhood and to contribute to sustainable and fruitful implementation of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy. The conceptual approach of SHAPEDEM-EU, as well as the envisaged results and outputs of the project will lead us to meet the expected impact of *Destination: Innovative Research on Democracy and Governance* by facilitating the active and inclusive empowerment of citizens in Europe and the neighbourhood countries and will improve the accountability, transparency, effectiveness, and trustworthiness of rule-of-law based institutions and policies. Section 2.1 details how SHAPEDEM-EU's results will meet all of the expected outcomes of the specific Horizon Europe agenda and facilitate a larger scientific, policy, and societal impact in the European Union and its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods. Section 2.2 outlines the envisioned measures to maximise SHAPEDEM-EU's impact on defined stakeholder groups. These include a preliminary **Dissemination, Communication, and Exploitation Strategy** as well as guidelines for the protection of IP.

8.1   SHAPEDEM-EU's unique contribution

(1) One of the main outcomes SHAPEDEM-EU anticipates is to provide the EU with comprehensive new knowledge on local democratic politics in six case countries in both neighbourhoods, which will enable the EU to exploit **our comprehensive stocktaking** of the past decade to revamp its democracy support toolkit in the upcoming decade and to elevate the effectiveness, accountability, and transparency of its policies. Therefore, one of our main outcomes is our **comprehensive collaborative Democracy Support Database** on the last decade, which SHAPEDEM-EU generates throughout Phase II in WPs 2-6

and is systematised in Phase III through WP7. Further, the aim is to provide a **comprehensive evidence base** to understand success factors and barriers in the implementation of the **APfHRD 2020-2024**. The Democracy Support Database will be updated at a limited scale by the project coordinator up to three years after the end of the project.

The intended outcome of this SHAPEDEM-EU endeavour is a Comprehensive Democracy Support Database to understand the shortcomings and barriers in the implementation of the APfHRD. The target group of the database is primarily the subset of EU policy makers.

(2) The essential steps SHAPEDEM-EU undertakes to guarantee this outcome is **to maintain the interactive Democracy Support Digital Dashboard** (**as well as the underlying data base**) under the responsibility of the coordinating institution JLU. The coordinator will update the Democracy Support Database - which forms the basis of the Democracy Support Digital Dashboard – for an additional three years after the end of the project (through additional funds applied for from various German funding institutions, e.g., the Foreign Ministry or the state of Hesse).

The envisioned outcome of this SHAPEDEM-EU contribution is a provisioned and updated interactive Democracy Support Digital Dashboard. The target groups include European and neighbourhood citizens, civil society organisations, policy advising community, as well as the scientific community.

(3) SHAPEDEM-EU develops an improved policy toolkit for the EU's democracy support practices by **conceptualising and pilot testing the Democracy Learning Loop** as the basis for a more sustainable and more legitimate tool to support democracy in the EU's neighbourhoods and pave the way for more stability and cooperation. SHAPEDEM-EU's project activities bring together a wide range of societal groups in all six case countries, including **two groups with no prior EU contact per country** in order to emphasise **previously unheard voices**. SHAPEDEM-EU also establishes an **inter-institutional approach** via channels of communication with relevant parts of the EU Commission including DG European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR), DG International Partnerships (INTPA), DG Research and Innovation (RTD), and DG European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO). Most importantly, we pursue close contact with the European Union External Action Service (EEAS), EEAS' departments on *Europe and Central Asia* and *the Greater Middle East*, and especially with the six EU delegations in our case countries. With the European Parliament (EP), SHAPEDEM-EU intends to establish contact with the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET), its Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI), the Committee on Women's Rights & Gender Equality (FEMM), the Committee on Development (DEVE), and the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the EU (INGEEP). Furthermore, we pursue close coordination as early as possible with EURONEST, the Delegations of the Parliamentary Partnership Committee with EaP countries and those in the Southern Neighbourhood. SHAPEDEM-EU have reached out to the EU delegations in the six case countries as well as the member state embassies from Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, and Sweden. SHAPEDEM-EU's **pilot testing of the Democracy Learning Loop** provides the EU with a number of lessons learned, to aid the EU in including formerly unheard voices from societies in both neighbourhoods. In addition, our *project results* allow for a systematic inclusion of **gender equality** & **digital transformations** into the EU's policy toolkit. Taken together, the result of our Democracy Learning Loop extends inclusiveness and empowerment. In the aftermath of the project, the Brussels-based partner CEF will sustain its **EU Democracy Hub publication series**, inspired by the findings of the

Democracy Learning Loop and with a special emphasis on a local-first approach, while including topics on the two cross-cutting challenges of gender equality & digital transformations.

The main outcome of this project contribution is a usable and pilot-tested Democracy Learning Loop as a new model for Democracy support. The target groups include EU policy makers, member state policy makers, policy advising community, and the scientific community.

(4) Our critical reflection on the EU's aspiration and role in practices of democracy support in its neighbourhoods against the background of multi-layered contestation lays the groundwork for **follow-up activities** from within the consortium. *First*, we plan to develop a digital university seminar on 'good practices of international democracy support from an inter-regional perspective' in year 1 after the project end together with JLU, UoW, AUB, RUC, JUK, and NaUKMA. *Second*, we intend to apply for **COST-network** and/or **Jean-Monnet-Network** funding to pursue a series of academic conferences to further disseminate our novel approach in the academic landscape.

The intended outcomes of this SHAPEDEM-EU endeavour are follow-up applications on joint critical reflections based on SHAPEDEM-EU's work. The target groups of this include the scientific community, EU policy makers, policy advising community.

8.2   SHAPEDEM-EU's wider impact

SHAPEDEM-EU achieves these outcomes by pursuing greater inclusiveness and embracing neighbourhood views, thereby providing a unique pathway to the expected impact of *Destination: Innovative Research on Democracy and Governance*. SHAPEDEM-EU's wider impact addresses three levels:

8.2.1   Scientific impact

SHAPEDEM-EU produces **high-quality new democratic knowledge** on local democratic politics in both neighbourhoods as well as on more effective practices of democracy support. This new democratic learning contributes to **strengthening human capital** in Research & Innovation. As a consortium of reputable and experienced experts on EU democracy support in the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods, SHAPEDEM-EU provides substantial **mutual academic learning** in academic landscapes in EU countries from the North (Denmark), South (Italy and Spain), West (Germany), East (Poland), and the UK as an important academic partner country. This mutual learning furthermore occurs between universities and think tanks as well as in a **cross-regional manner** between our academic partners and in the Southern (Lebanon) and Eastern (Ukraine) Neighbourhood and **across a number of disciplines**, including political science, international relations, sociology, regional studies, gender studies, migration studies, and post-colonial studies.

SHAPEDEM-EU's approach enables it to reach for greater **self-reflection about democratic scientific practices** (or lack thereof) in researching, publishing, and academic instruction. This includes especially issues of **gender equality** as well as a thorough reflection on digital transformations in the academic sphere. SHAPEDEM-EU's democratic scientific practices, guided by inclusivity, respect, transparency, and trust allow for more inclusive, cross-disciplinary, and respectful implementation of our research processes. Our novel perspective published in our academic outputs contributes to innovative academic research on the **future of democracy support**. As detailed in the open access policy above,

SHAPEDEM-EU will contribute to a **greater diffusion of knowledge and open science** in connection with the HEU framework.

Thus, SHAPEDEM-EU's scientific impact includes a sustainable academic network within the EU and the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods as well as innovative contributions to global academic debate on democracy support. These can provide a high-level impact on academic researchers, think tank experts, and students of democratisation.

8.2.2 Policy impact

SHAPEDEM-EU particularly intends to engage the **knowledge-user community** as part of our innovative **Democracy Learning Loop**. Throughout the whole life-cycle of the project work, SHAPEDEM-EU activates **new channels of sustainable interaction** with EU and member state policy makers, policy advising communities, and civil society organisations to **strengthen accountability, transparency, efficiency, and trust** in EU democracy support practices. The new knowledge provided by SHAPEDEM-EU will contribute to **well-informed decision making**, grounded in SHAPEDEM-EU's evidence-based findings on local democratic politics in both neighbourhoods, on EU and member states' democracy support practices as well as on strategies of their international allies or adversaries in democracy support in the neighbourhoods.

SHAPEDEM-EU establishes channels of communication and, where possible, close coordination with **four EU Commission DGs**, **two EEAS departments**, **six EU delegations** in the case countries, **four EP committees** and **one sub-committee, all EP delegations** with parliaments from the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods of our six case countries, the **EURONEST** as well as the **embassies of Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, and Sweden** in our six case countries. Based on our **13 research-informed policy recommendations,** its comprehensive **Democracy Support Database** as well as its **pilot testing of the Democracy Learning Loop**, policy makers will be able to better strive to meet the **UN SDGs 16** (Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions), **5** (Gender Equality), and **10** (Reduced Inequalities).

SHAPEDEM-EU's policy making impact can be seen to include developing evidence-based decision-making based on SHAPEDEM-EU's pilot-tested Democracy Learning Loop in a number of involved EU and member states' institutions which yields greater accountability, transparency, and inclusiveness in the EU's democracy support practices; The envisioned impact lies primarily among policy makers in the EU and beyond.

8.2.3 Societal impact

SHAPEDEM-EU's **interactive Democracy Support Digital Dashboard** on the stocktaking of developments of the last decade and the results of our pilot test of the Democracy Learning Loop, which will be set up in month 30 of the project and which will remain accessible for a minimum of three years after the project end, will give citizens in the EU and the neighbourhoods a greater sense of understanding of EU democracy support and improve transparency in the EU's democracy support practices and hence contribute to **citizen empowerment**.

During our **pilot-test of the Democracy Learning Loop**, SHAPEDEM-EU unites stakeholders from EU institutions introduced above together with a range of societal actors from our six case countries, among those 'new voices' from groups with no prior contact with the EU. By applying innovative

participatory techniques for joint democratic learning on equal footing, the Democracy Learning Loop **improves the democratic knowledge of all stakeholders**. The results of the pilot-tested Democracy Learning Loop will be made accessible, which allows **for applying the Loop after the project end** in different policy settings.

SHAPEDEM-EU's social media outreach and media communication contribute to **intensified societal awareness** of the necessity to improve the EU's democracy support practices.

SHAPEDEM-EU's research and work on **gender equality** & **digital transformations** contribute to the wider knowledge of the EU's legal standards and policy programmes in both fields.

SHAPEDEM-EU's impact on societal includes empowering citizens empowerment in the neighbourhood through increased transparency based on our Democracy Support Digital Dashboard. Moreover, SHAPEDEM-EU can increase inclusivity by including societal groups with no prior contact with the EU into our Democracy Learning Loop and raise awareness through our (social) media outreach among the wider public.

9   Conclusion

Amidst the growing threats to democracy across the globe as well as the growing contestation of the European Union as a global actor, the EU needs to find a way to better support democratic politics in both neighbourhoods. The EU has struggled to meet the demands of neighbourhood societies and to develop an adequate policy toolkit to practice democracy support as its lacking response to local trends has limited its policy impact. Hence, it is time to 'rethink, reshape, and review' the EU's policies. SHAPEDEM-EU's approach builds on the assumption that the EU needs to learn from its neighbourhood partners, in order to take local dynamics better into account. We suggest new ways of approaching new social movements and civil society organisations, to learn more about forms of local democratic knowledge, which have not been visible thus far in EU discourses. Furthermore, we follow the ambition to reflect upon the impact of EU's member state perspectives on democracy support, especially against the background of increased contestation of democracy within the Union. We intend to apply innovative tools of collective democratic learning of all stakeholders involved in EU democracy support policies, in order to pilot-test a Democracy Learning Loop, which would allow us to showcase relevant improvements. As a result of the collaboration of its 12 partner institutions, SHAPEDEM-EU will offer necessary and cohesive recommendations based on insights gained from local democratic knowledge in both neighbourhoods to foster a more inclusive dialogue with EU institutions and between neighbourhood and European societies.

SHAPEDEM-EU intends to generate wider impact on three levels: At the scientific level, SHAPEDEM-EU produces high-quality new democratic knowledge on local democratic politics in both neighbourhoods as well as on more effective practices of democracy support. SHAPEDEM-EU's approach enables it to reach for greater self-reflection about democratic scientific practices (or lack thereof) in researching, publishing, and academic instruction. At the policy level, SHAPEDEM-EU particularly intends to engage the knowledge-user community as part of our innovative Democracy Learning Loop. Throughout the whole life-cycle of the project work, SHAPEDEM-EU activates new channels of sustainable interaction with EU and member state policy makers, policy advising communities, and civil society organisations to strengthen accountability, transparency, efficiency, and

trust in EU democracy support practices. The new knowledge provided by SHAPEDEM-EU will contribute to well-informed decision making. At the societal level, SHAPEDEM-EU intends to reach for citizen's empowerment in the neighbourhood through increased transparency based on a Democracy Support Digital Dashboard and through increasing inclusivity by including new societal groups.

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