



# Limited Leverage: The United Nations and Democratic Support in the EU's Neighbourhood

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## Abstract

Although not explicitly mentioned in the UN Charter, commitment to democracy has swiftly emerged as a key priority in the UN's normative agenda, as highlighted in foundational documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Through its various agencies, the UN has also developed a wide toolbox to support democratic institutions at the country level.

This paper identifies three core methods employed by the UN and its agencies to foster democratic and institutional resilience: electoral assistance, capacity-building, and the declaration and codification of legal norm. By analysing the effectiveness of these tools in supporting democracy across the EU's Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods, this paper argues that the UN's capacity to act is hindered by the guidelines and limitations imposed by its member states – many of which are authoritarian regimes. Additionally, the UN does not operate in a vacuum; rather, it reflects broader geopolitical dynamics. These may weaken its role as a credible democracy support actor as evidenced in several countries in the EU's Neighbourhood such as Belarus and Tunisia.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The United Nations (UN) was created in 1945 in response to the atrocities of World War II and to prevent further conflicts by fostering dialogue among countries and upholding international peace (United Nations, 2023d). In the aftermath of the war, the representatives of 50 countries met in San Francisco to draft the UN's foundational document – the UN Charter (United Nations, 2023d). This outlines the goals and ambitions of the organisation, which widely focus on maintaining international peace and security and promote friendly relations among states. While the Charter mentions the importance of protecting and safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedom, it does not mention the term 'democracy', nor it sets out to promote it (United Nations, 2015). Indeed, the UN does not adopt a specific definition of democracy – refraining from endorsing any form of governance – but it rather identifies certain key principles, including the existence of a pluralistic party system (United Nations, 2023b).

The UN has a global outlook, and it currently consists of 193 member states from all geographical regions, making it the largest international organisation in the world. All its member states have equal holding and rights within the UN (United Nations, 2023e). It follows that the UN holds significant interest in both the EU's Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that UN's actions in these regions do not take place in a vacuum, but they are strongly influenced by European foreign policy as the EU funds a majority of UN projects and, combined with its member states, accounts for one quarter of all financial contributions to UN agencies, funds and programmes (European External Action Service, 2023).

While international peace and security remain the cornerstones of its mission, the UN also possesses a broad toolbox to support democracy globally. This paper will identify the instruments used by the UN to support democracy in the EU's Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods, namely electoral assistance, capacity building and its declaration and clarification of legal norms. This paper will further strongly focus on SHAPEDEM-EU's selected case countries: Armenia, Georgia, Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia and Ukraine. As such, it argues that, while the UN can provide useful technical support in this specific field, it does not have a

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The content of this article was last updated in December 2023

significant impact in the (non)democratic trajectory of countries. Indeed, the UN may only support countries in their democratic ambitions when such assistance is requested and falls within the boundaries defined by the respective governments.

## **1 Discourses, practices and impact**

### **1.1 UN's Understanding of Democracy**

At a first glance, democracy does not seem to play a pivotal role in the UN policy and practice. The UN Charter notably lacks any reference to the term 'democracy'. When outlining its objectives, the UN does not explicitly mention the fostering and/or support of democratic values. Lastly, democracy is not a prerequisite for a state to attain UN membership. Indeed, many UN member states do not adhere to liberal democratic norms nor carry out free and fair elections (Newman and Rich, 2004).

Yet, the UN does emphasise that democracy is one of its core values, supported through the promotion and protection of, among others, human rights and peace and security. Although absent from the UN Charter, democratic principles are believed to be enshrined within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms that "the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government" (UN General Assembly, 1948). In a similar vein, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is often considered to provide the legal basis and normative underpinning for the principle of democracy in the context of international law (UN General Assembly, 1966). This is evident by Articles 21 and 22, which respectively introduce freedom of assembly and freedom of association.

Because of the very diverse nature of its member states, the UN refrains from differentiating among various forms of democracy and does not seek to advocate for any specific system of governance. Instead, it focuses on upholding a set of democratic values such as greater civic participation and protection of fundamental freedoms. The former Commission on Human Rights, predecessor to the Human Rights Council, contributed to the development of a broader UN understanding of democracy. In 2002, it formalised ten fundamental components of democracy (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2002). These are: respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, freedom of association, freedom of expression and opinion, access to power and its exercise in accordance with the rule of law, the holding of periodic free and fair elections by universal suffrage and by secret ballot as the expression of the will of the people, a pluralistic system of political parties and organizations, the separation of powers, the independence of the judiciary, transparency and accountability in public administration, and free, independent and pluralistic media;

This approach to democracy is similar to the one adopted by SHAPEDEM-EU in its concept manual insofar as it avoids a prescriptive notion of democracy and rather relies on specific principles and values. Additionally, the five partial regimes identified by SHAPEDEM-EU as central to democracy - democratic elections, political liberties, civil rights, horizontal accountability and effective power to govern - exhibit substantial overlap with the fundamental components of democracy as identified by the Commission on Human Rights.

It is worth noting that, beyond its official discourse, many of the democratic values identified and supported by the UN stand in clear contradiction with the practices of many of its member states. As an instance, while the UN highlights the importance of a pluralistic system of political parties, China, one of the charter members of the UN and among the five permanent members

of its Security Council, has an authoritarian one-party system (Freedom House, 2022). This mismatch is only one of the many examples and sheds light on the limits of the UN as a democracy support actor.

This approach to democracy support, reluctant to promote a specific system of governance, has been deemed pragmatic (Joyner, 1999) insofar as any imposition by the UN on its Member States could lead to local resentment and ultimately prevent any democratisation process. Joyner (1999) further adds that any democracy support initiative lacking popular support in the selected country would contradict the right to self-determination upon which the UN was created.

Nonetheless, UN's democracy support has arguably been effective in the development of a rhetoric capable of advancing global democracy (Thérien and Dumontier, 2009). UN leaders successfully linked structural changes in the work order with the increasing globalization of democracy, theorising democracy as a "universal right" (Thérien and Dumontier, 2009). This was particularly important in strengthening the role of non-state actors and their participation in decision-making at both the local and international level. Scholarly discussions have highlighted that the support provided by the UN for democracy is inherently restricted by the limitations outlined in its Charter. These constraints arise from the non-binding nature of its decisions and its membership structure, which is based upon the principle of sovereignty. Additionally, the presence of entities, such as the UN Security Council, endowed with veto power further constrains the UN's ability to fully endorse and promote democracy (Schmidt, 2015).

## **1.2 UN Contribution to Democracy Support**

Within the United Nations, certain agencies play a more prominent role in democracy support. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) contributes to strengthening democratic institutions and processes by providing, among others, advisory services and capacity-building programs (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). It focuses around four main areas of work: democratic futures, electoral cycle support, parliamentary development and women's political participation. The four selected areas of work highlight the importance of gender equality, a cross-cutting challenge under the framework of SHAPEDEM-EU, within the UN system.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is also active in democracy support through the fostering of discussions on democracy and human rights in contexts such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the Human Rights Council (HRC). The HRC proved instrumental in establishing a clear link between the democratic values, often enunciated by the UN, and democracy itself by adopting, among others, resolution 28/14 (2015) 'Human Rights, Democracy, and Rule of Law'. It remains worth noting that this resolution is extremely watered down when it comes to supporting democracy as it states that 'while democracies share common features, there is no single model of democracy, and that democracy does not belong to any country or region (..) reaffirming further the necessity of due respect for sovereignty and the right to self-determination' (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015).

Lastly, the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) is responsible for the funding of projects that aim at strengthening civil society space, fostering human rights and fundamental freedoms and ensuring CSOs' strong engagement in democratic processes (United Nations, 2023a). It was established by the then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2005 with the clear objective of "supporting democracy by strengthening countries' capacity to implement the principles and

practices of democracy” (Rich, 2010). In 2021, UNDEF was active in a number of countries across the EU’s neighbourhood, such as Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

## 2 Instruments

### 2.1 Political instruments

#### 2.1.1 Electoral Support

The UN possesses a variety of instruments and tools to foster democracy at the national, regional and local level. Nevertheless, this paper argues that UN democracy support policies are highly dependent on the willingness of each specific country to democratise and receive such support. The UN can provide substantial impetus to a country already on a democratisation path, intervening only within the bounds defined by the country itself. A prime example of this is through the provision of electoral assistance.

UN electoral assistance is arguably the organisation’s most frequently employed mechanism to foster democratic institutions. It can only be granted if requested by the country concerned or when mandated by the UN Security Council or UN General Assembly. Since the creation of the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs as the focal point for electoral assistance in 1971, around 115 countries have successfully requested and received electoral support (United Nations, 2023c).

UN electoral support may vary depending on the country under consideration. The UN prides itself in its commitment to avoid the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach by tailoring its services to accommodate different political dynamics and local contexts. The General Assembly has further reaffirmed that UN electoral assistance must be provided in a neutral and independent manner, respecting the sovereignty of the country and upholding the belief that each Member States is ultimately responsible for the successful implementation of elections (UN General Assembly, 2021). This language reflects the contradictions of UN democracy support policies and demonstrates its dependence on the willingness of each government to successfully foster democratic institutions and values.

Many countries in the EU’s Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods have successfully asked for and received electoral assistance from the UN, though the results varied depending on the country context. In **Tunisia**, the UN supported the country with the organisation of its first democratic elections in 2011, following the Arab Spring (United Nations Democracy Fund, 2011). Through the presence of a team of around 15 electoral experts on the ground, the UN provided guidance and assistance to Tunisia’s independent electoral authorities and political parties alike. As many of these actors were undergoing their first elections, capacity-building and training were of uttermost importance. Against this backdrop, UNDP played a pivotal role and achieved key objectives including the procurement of ballot boxes, seals and stamps, and the provision of personal coaching and support to women candidates (United Nations Development Programme, 2013).

It is however necessary to state that the presence of UN electoral assistance in Tunisia did not directly result in the implementation of free and fair elections. For instance, the UN was present during the 2009 elections of former president Ben Ali, which were deemed by V-Dem as ‘not at all’ free and fair (Lührmann, 2018). Similarly, the UN was not able to provide any effective support during the 2022-23 parliamentary elections in Tunisia, which witnessed an astonishingly low turnout of around 11% and a strengthening of Kais Saied’s authoritarian rule in the country

(Tarek and McDowall, 2023). Insofar as the UN can only provide electoral assistance based on the willingness of the member states, it could provide little to no support in a situation where the government was already headed towards a rather authoritarian path.

The UN's actions, or rather lack thereof, during the 2022-23 parliamentary elections in Tunisia can also be explained through the lenses of European foreign policy. The UN does not operate in a vacuum, its actions are often highly dependent on the support of its member states and like-minded organisations, namely the EU. The EU has consistently refrained from criticising Tunisian president Kais Saied despite his overt willingness to lead the country back to authoritarianism (Geddie, 2023). Instead, the EU and its member states have prioritised security concerns and continued to provide aid to Tunisia with the aim of curbing illegal migration. It is arguable that the unwillingness of the EU and its member states to take a strong stance against Saied's regime influenced the UN's policy and its ability to continue fostering democratic institutions in Tunisia.

Similarly, a strong UN presence and consistent provision of electoral support did not prevent severe flaws in the 2022 Lebanese general elections. In Lebanon, UNDP enacted the Lebanese Electoral Assistance Project (LEAP), funded by the EU. This project, which started in 2016, aimed to foster strong institutions and facilitate processes to ensure the administration of transparent, inclusive, free and fair elections in the country (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). To achieve this objective, it worked closely with the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MoIM), electoral stakeholders and relevant civil society organisations active in elections.

Despite this significant support, the 2022 elections presented significant shortcomings (Hope, 2022). For months ahead of the elections, the government remained vague on whether they were actually going to take place, which resulted in 'delayed preparations and inequalities among candidates.' Additionally, the elections were severely underfunded as the government allocated only around €17 million to hold the 2022 parliamentary elections compared to the €51 million spent for the 2018 elections (Noe, 2022). Lastly, and most importantly, the 2022 elections were marked by flagrant voter and candidate intimidation along with widespread vote-buying in the lead-up to the elections and on the election day (Hope, 2022).

While neither Egypt nor Morocco received electoral assistance, the UN undertook specific measures to promote free and fair elections in **Jordan**. Among those, the project 'Support to the Electoral Cycle in Jordan' was implemented in 2012-2017 in response to a request by the Kingdom of Jordan and was mostly funded by the EU with additional funding from UNDP (Reske-Nielsen, 2017). This project aimed at strengthening the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and fostering coordination among different bodies under the overall guidance of the IEC. It was deemed extremely successful by external evaluators, who believed that it "made a major contribution to the capacity of the IEC to deliver credible elections of a high standard" (Reske-Nielsen, 2017). However, it is worth noting that its success was strictly contained to the focus areas requested and approved by the Kingdom of Jordan. Other aspects of Jordan's political reform system, which inevitably influence the conduct of free and fair elections, continue to require further attention, but assistance is conditional to a request by the relevant Jordanian authorities (Reske-Nielsen, 2017).

While the Council of Europe provided electoral assistance to a wider number of countries in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, including Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the UN still supported some countries such as Moldova and Armenia. In **Moldova**, UNDP has implemented the "Enhancing Democracy in Moldova through Inclusive and Transparent Elections" (EDMITE II)



Project, which aimed at strengthening the overall electoral process in the country by fostering transparency and inclusiveness and by ensuring adequate access to reliable information. It relied significantly on national institutions, including the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) and the Center for Continuous Electoral Training (CCET); this is in line with the UN's commitment to adopt and implement a bottom-up approach with strong local engagement.

Through EDMITE II, the UN demonstrated a commitment to the two cross-cutting challenges identified by SHAPEDEM-EU. On digital transformation, UNDP considerably focused its efforts on the automatisisation of the electoral process by strengthening the State Automated Information System "Elections" (SAISE). The primary goal of SAISE is to facilitate entirely automated elections to increase transparency and ensure more inclusiveness (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2014). UNDP supported this ambition by, among others, optimising SAISE's security, creating additional modules and ensuring that it complies with all legal and technical requirements ahead of the elections.

On gender equality, UNDP aimed to inform the public on recent trends related to women's participation at the different levels of the electoral process. As such, it developed and presented infographics on the number of women elected officials for the position of members of the parliament, local/district/municipal councillors and/or mayor. Similarly, UNDP provided workshops aimed at strengthening women's participation by fostering skills, such as public speaking, and sharing best practices (United Nations Development Programme, 2021).

Thus, UN democracy support initiatives related to electoral assistance in Moldova did demonstrate the UN's modestly successful, though not dramatically influential, capacity to strengthen institutions and to foster inclusive and transparent elections (Newman and Rich, 2004). However, this support remained strictly dependent on the willingness of the government to cooperate, and it aimed at ameliorating already existing services and initiatives.

The same conclusion cannot be reached for **Armenia**, where UNDP, in cooperation with the EU, provided electoral support for the 2021 parliamentary elections. Through this support, it aimed to foster inclusive and transparent elections by strengthening the technical capabilities and expertise of relevant institutions and providing voter education, with a focus on minority and vulnerable groups (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). However, the elections were marred by various issues. Leading up to the voting, a significant level of polarization, with harsh and intolerant rhetoric, shaped the discourse and exacerbated the marginalisation of vulnerable communities. On election day, observers from the OSCE reported cases of "party or alliance proxies interfering in the process" and instances of vote buying and pressures on voters (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2021). Thus, the electoral support provided by the UN did not effectively contribute to the development of a conducive environment for inclusive and transparent elections.

### 2.1.2 Capacity-building

The Guidance Note of the Secretary-General on Democracy, published in 2009, provides the overall framework for a UN-wide strategy on supporting democracy based upon universal principles, norms and standards (United Nations Secretary General, 2009). Notably, this note affirms that capacity-building must be an essential part of the UN's democracy support toolbox so as to ensure longevity of results and local ownership. The UN, mainly via UNDP and UNDEF, has designed and developed a number of capacity-building initiatives in the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods. Among those, Tunisia stands out as a priority country. UNDEF has

implemented around 18 projects in the country since 2012; these projects have a clear focus on CSOs and prioritise dialogue-based designs (United Nations Democracy Fund, 2011). Additionally, many of these projects targeted the local youth, especially marginalised groups.

Against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of **Ukraine**, UNDP has implemented a number of projects in cooperation with the EU to continue supporting democratic policies and practices in times of war. In particular, it aimed at advancing human rights and gender equality, countering widespread corruption and empowering civil society (United Nations Development Programme, 2023a). As an example, UNDP just completed the project "Civil Society for Enhanced Democracy and Human Rights in Ukraine" – this initiative aligns with the UN's overarching goal of strengthening NGOs by equipping Ukrainian civil society actors with the essential capabilities to make a tangible difference in the reform processes (United Nations Development Programme, 2023b).

The UN Country Team in **Azerbaijan** also developed a Cooperation Framework for 2021-2025, which provides overall guidance for on the ground initiatives (United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, 2021a). This Framework identifies four priority areas, out of which (a) building stronger institutions and (b) developing a gender-equitable society particularly stand out in the framework of SHAPEDEM-EU. To achieve these objectives, specific capacity-building projects have been implemented. For instance, under priority area a) stronger institution, the UN focused on judicial strengthening by fostering policies on access to justice and legal aid for vulnerable communities including migrants and asylum seekers (United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, 2021a). Similarly, on gender-equality, the UN aimed to provide skill training related to politics and economics for women and girls from marginalised communities so as to enhance their role in society (United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, 2021a). These projects are a good starting point to ameliorate the situation; however, they remain still extremely broad and are unlikely to bring about considerable change in the democratisation process in the country.

In **Belarus**, the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2021-2025, which guides UN action in the country, notably fails to include any democracy-related objectives in its key priorities, which rather focus on green transition and digital transformation (United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, 2021b). An exception should be made for gender equality, which steers a significant amount of UN initiatives in the country; for instance, the United Nations Population Fund is implementing a project aimed at teaching digital fluency among older people, with most learners being women (United Nations Belarus, 2023). It is worth nothing that Belarus has consistently cracked down on the opposition and civil society through arbitrary arrests and torture, in complete breach of human rights. This environment does not allow room for work on good governance and human rights. As such, the case of Belarus exemplifies how UN action is highly dependent on the local context and the willingness of the government to cooperate.

Similar conclusions can be drawn across certain countries of the Southern Neighbourhood, specifically **Egypt** and **Libya**. In **Egypt**, capacity building initiatives focus considerably on aspects such as climate change, strengthening human capital and fostering economic development. While UNDP does mention 'transparency, good governance and the rule of law' as one of its priority areas in the framework of cooperation with Egypt, no further information can be found on the practical implementation of projects or activities related to these areas (United Nations Development Program, 2022). The most recent initiative on democracy was implemented in 2017

through the organisation of the two-day conference "Ways to Strengthen the Democratic Transformation of Egypt" (United Nations Democracy Fund, 2017). Nonetheless, since then, most initiatives had a strong focus on employment, prosperity and overall economic development. It is worth noting that Egypt is currently characterised by an almost non-existent civic space, restriction of civil liberties and repression of virtually all the opposition (Freedom House, 2023). Such an environment is not conducive to democracy-related capacity building skills, which would need to take place mainly at the request of government representatives.

In **Libya**, the Cooperation Framework established by the UN Country Team inevitably focuses on objectives such as durable peace, migration management and sustainable economic development (United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, 2023). It does mention the importance of the holding of free and fair elections, but, similarly to Egypt, no initiatives are being planned or implemented in this regard. The country is marked by more than a decade of violence, consistent lack of physical security and recurrent violations of human rights (Freedom House, 2023), which strongly limits the UN range of action.

In **Tunisia**, capacity-building initiatives intensified following the Arab uprisings and as the country embarked on a democratisation path. As an example, the Global Programme for Parliamentary Strengthening assisted around 50 political parties between April and July 2011; this aimed at strengthening their knowledge and skills, while fostering an environment where parties from different backgrounds could enter dialogue (United Nations Development Programme, 2012). The cross-cutting challenge of gender equality also took a prominent role in UNDP efforts as the agency implemented a program to train potential women candidates and support them throughout the campaign and the elections. Similarly, ahead of the 2022 elections, UNDP drafted and disseminated a toolkit on online media and (dis)information in the context of electoral progresses. With a specific focus on young people, it provides guidance on how to navigate the digital world in an informed manner, aware of the ways social medias are being exploited for political ends (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

While these endeavours have been effective in promoting civil engagement and offering the requested technical assistance, the UN has not wielded significant influence on Tunisia's political trajectory. After the Arab uprisings, the UN, namely UNDP, did develop an ambitious agenda to support the country in its democratisation path. However, given Tunisia's current regression towards a more authoritarian direction, the UN has struggled to meet the challenge and offer substantial support in defence of democratic institutions (Pickard, 2013).

Capacity-building projects thus demonstrate UN's involvement in the democracy support arena, albeit in a way that is extremely technical and solely reactive as it relies almost entirely on the initiative of the country under consideration and is limited by the larger geopolitical ambitions of actors such as the EU.

### 2.1.3 Declaration and clarification of legal norms

A key aspect of the UN work on democracy support relates to the declaration and clarification of legal norms. This process led to the creation of universal principles regarding the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, starting with the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, affirming that "the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government... [and] shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage..." (UN General Assembly, 1948). Among the different bodies of the UN, the **Human Rights Council**, and its predecessor the Human Rights Commission, acted as the

key driver in the declaration and clarification of legal norms on human rights and democracy (Newman and Rich, 2004).

The resolutions adopted by the HRC shed light on its role as a democracy support actor in the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods. The HRC has adopted a number of resolutions on **Georgia** under agenda item 10; this particular agenda item focuses on technical assistance and capacity building, steering clear of political undertones and avoiding controversial language (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2007). The adoption of these resolutions did not lead to any tangible impact on the situation in the country partly due to the presence of the Russian Federation in the HRC, which hindered the possibility to discuss human rights violations in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Limon and Botchoidze, 2022). Similarly, the language was consistently watered down in an effort to ensure the adoption of the resolution – this however resulted in an almost sole focus on technical issues, while the term democracy is only mentioned in passing.

A similar conclusion can be made with respect to resolutions adopted on **Ukraine**. Most of them were also filed under agenda item 10 by Ukraine itself. While they do not mention democracy, they resulted in the deployment in 2014 of the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU), in charge of monitoring the human rights situation in Ukraine, especially in the occupied territories of Crimea and Donbass. This was instrumental in recording over 600 cases of torture and ill-treatment by the Russian Federation of conflict-related detainees. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the HRC also set up the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine to keep track of and investigate all alleged human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law (United Nations Ukraine, 2023). These mechanisms are useful in the strive towards justice and accountability, nonetheless, it is worth noting that they do not directly aim to support democracy in the country nor discuss more specific issues linked to democratic reforms.

The issue of **Palestine** remains extremely contentious within the HRC, and the wider UN system. The failure to adopt a comprehensive and clear position on the Palestinian situation exposes a fundamental inconsistency in the UN's rhetoric and actions. Against the backdrop of decolonisation, the UN has slowly moved to recognise Palestine's right to self-determination and its legal status, currently holding the position of a non-member observer State (Imseis, 2020). It also expressed criticism towards Israel's occupation of Palestine, but over time its positions have gradually become diluted or legally ambiguous. As an example, from 1977 to 1981 the General Assembly openly declared the occupation as 'illegal'. As the Palestine question became more and more politicised, this delineation was abandoned by the UNGA in favour of describing the occupation as a 'violation of the Charter of the United Nations' (Imseis, 2020).

More importantly, the UN's recognition of the illegality of Israel's occupation did not result in any specific practice to ensure an end to this regime. Instead, the UN successfully equated the question of Palestine to a solely humanitarian issue, which focused on the provision of aid through a number of UN agencies and to the monitoring and reporting of international human rights and humanitarian law. This process significantly weakened the UN's positioning and credibility as a democracy support actor and key driver in declaration and clarification of legal norms on human rights and democracy.

### 3 Relation with EU Strategies in the Field of Democracy Support

The UN cooperates significantly with the EU in the field of democracy support and consistently reaffirms the EU's strategies in its neighbourhoods. Multilateralism is at the heart of EU's foreign policy and the EU has repeatedly stated its commitment to effectively work in coordination with the UN in areas such as human rights (European Council, 2023). The EU is highly active within UN agencies as it holds the status of permanent observer at the UN General Assembly, allowing it to intervene early in debates. Notably, the EU is the only observer with the right to orally present proposals and amendments, this signifies the importance given to the EU within the broader UN system (European Council, 2023).

The EU's commitment to the multilateral system is evident through its funding of and participation in UN activities. The EU and its Member States together account for one quarter of all financial contributions to UN agencies, funds and programmes. The EU is also a key funder of UN projects in its neighbourhoods, as most UNDP projects and activities taking place in the EU's Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods are funded by either the EU or one of its member states.

Electoral assistance remains a key area of partnership for the EU and the UN. Up until 2020, the two actors had cooperated in more than 50 countries, including the EU's Neighbourhoods, and nearly 200 projects to grant technical assistance in the field of elections. As testament to this collaboration, in 2006, the European Commission and UNDP formalised their partnership by signing of the Electoral Assistance Guidelines. These marked the establishment of a Joint Task Force on Electoral Assistance. This instrument aimed to leverage the specificities of both actors and increase the efficiency of their mechanisms when assisting third countries in the development and implementation of free and fair elections (EC-UNDP JTF, n.d.).

As an instance, the Lebanese Electoral Assistance Project was implemented by UNDP while funded by the EU. This is only one of many examples of coordination among UN agencies and the EU in democracy-related projects across the Union's neighbourhoods.

In sum, the UN's presence in the EU's neighbouring regions not only reaffirms the EU's values and commitments but also actively contributes to their realisation. This contribution is made through the execution of EU-funded projects that are fully aligned with EU foreign policy priorities and democracy support policies.

### 4 Conclusion

The UN has a wide range of instruments it can use to support democratic institutions at the country level. Among those, electoral assistance is arguably the most widely used. The implementation of free and fair elections is a cornerstone of democratic systems and the UN's assistance in this regard is of key importance. Nonetheless, while UN electoral support provides specific and highly technical assistance, it does not necessarily result in the carrying out of free and fair elections. The UN itself recognises that it is eventually up to the member states to ensure that the elections are implemented in line with the international standards and does not aim to overextend its mandate beyond the boundaries provided by the country.

A second method used by the UN to support democracy is through the provision of capacity building. The UNDP plays a key role in developing and implementing capacity building services in the field of democracy support and human rights safeguarding. This instrument is widely used in the EU's Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods in cooperation with the European Union itself. Capacity building efforts constitutes a prime example of the UN-EU relations in the field of

democracy support. The UN not only complements but it also directly affirms and aids the implementation of EU democracy support policies across its neighbouring countries, insofar as the Union provides significant fundings to or participates as an implementing partner in UN projects across these regions.

The UN also gained a prominent role in the declaration and codification of legal norms. This was evident with the drafting of, among others, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Nonetheless, these efforts can also have a more targeted, country-focused approach through the adoption of resolution by UN bodies such as the HRC and the UNGA. These resolutions are often the result of compromise among member states and, as such, they do not contain strong stances in favour of democratic institutions e.g. the term 'democracy' is not mentioned in HRC resolutions on Ukraine. Similarly, contended political issues may weaken the role of the UN in democracy support. As an instance, in the case of Palestine, the organisation failed to adopt a consistent stand in line with international human rights and humanitarian law.

In sum, these three instruments demonstrate that the UN has the capacity to provide significant democracy support to countries, nonetheless this support is hindered by the fact that the UN can only act as far as requested by its member states – many of which are authoritarian regimes. Additionally, the UN does not operate in a vacuum but reflects the geopolitical dynamics which frame its margins of actions, such context may weaken the role of the UN as a credible democracy support actor as is the case with several countries in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood such as Tunisia and Palestine.

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