



# European Contestations of EU Democracy Support in Lebanon

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Authors: Giulia Daga

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## Abstract

Since the launch of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership in 1995, democracy support has been a pillar of the relationship between the EU and Lebanon. In 2006, with the entry into force of the EU-Lebanon Association Agreement (signed in 2002), the country became a target of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which insists on supporting “human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Lebanon” through the establishment of independent public institutions and a focus on fighting corruption. Despite the strong discursive emphasis put on the EU’s role in democracy support to Lebanon since the launch of the ENP, the European Union has been criticized for both its objectives and modus operandi.

This paper seeks to trace the discursive contestation of EU democracy support practices in Lebanon, with a focus on voices that come from within the EU, both among insiders and outsiders to European policymaking, taking as a conceptual reference the Working Paper on Democracy Learning Loop Concept, developed in the framework of the Horizon Europe project SHAPEDEM-EU (Achraimer and Pace 2024). First, the paper provides an overview of who speaks about Lebanon in Europe, both inside and outside the EU institutions. Second, it maps the contestation of EU democracy support practices, considering whether discursive change has coincided with three phases of European engagement: post-2005; post-2011; post-2019.

Based on the works of Jones and McBeth (2010) and Stone (2012) on narratives in the political and policy spheres, the paper identifies two main clusters of narratives into which to categorise different specific types of contestations, based on the different identification of the EU as the ‘problem’ (villain) and/or the ‘solution’ (hero). To do this, the paper is based on the qualitative discourse analysis of twenty-nine motions for resolution in the European Parliament between 2005 and 2024, and eight in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in October and November 2024. The data is further enriched by open-source information on EU democracy support to Lebanon.

## Introduction

Since the launch of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership in 1995, democracy support has been a pillar of the relationship between the EU and Lebanon ([European Commission, 2025](#)). In 2006, with the entry into force of the EU-Lebanon Association Agreement (signed in 2002), the country became a target of the [European Neighbourhood Policy](#) (ENP), which insists on supporting “human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Lebanon” through the establishment of independent public institutions and a focus on fighting corruption ([EEAS, 2021a](#)).

A second phase of EU’s engagement towards the country coincided with the post-Arab uprisings context, the so-called 2015 ‘refugee crisis’, and the launch of a [renewed version of the Neighbourhood Policy](#) ([European Commission, n.d](#)). Among the new instruments with an effect on Lebanon, the EU launched a regional trust fund in response to the increasing presence of Syrian refugees in the neighbouring countries, with the aim to improve their public services. In 2016, the EU and Lebanon adopted a [Compact](#) that increasingly moved the attention towards stability, security, counterterrorism, and migration, while still being adamant in promoting rule of law and democratic governance ([European Commission, 2017](#)).

A third phase in the EU’s approach to Lebanon can be situated after the 2019 protests in the country, which brought the Lebanese economic and political collapse to the surface. Since, the EU has played a major role as a donor of medical equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic and as a co-sponsor of the Reform, Recovery, and Reconstruction Framework (3RF) after the August 4, 2020, Beirut port explosion

[\(Lebanon 3RF\)](#). The three central goals of the 3RF brought back at the centre the need for structural social and political reforms towards a more accountable and democratic country [\(EEAS, 2021b\)](#).

In addition, the EU has increased its effort in support of the rule of law by adopting in 2021 a framework for targeted sanctions on persons and entities responsible for undermining democracy or the rule of law in Lebanon [\(European Council, 2021\)](#). The framework was extended in 2023 [\(European Council, 2023\)](#). Moreover, in May 2024, the President of the EU Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced to pledge 1 billion euros of funding towards Lebanon until 2027 to strengthen basic services, the economy, the Lebanese Armed Forces, border management, and the protection of refugees [\(European Commission, 2024\)](#).

Despite the strong discursive emphasis put on the EU's role in democracy support to Lebanon throughout all these phases, the European Union has been criticised for both its objectives and *modus operandi*, as will be shown in this paper. Indeed, the paper seeks to trace the narratives of contestation of EU democracy support practices in Lebanon, with a focus on voices that come from within the EU, both among insiders and outsiders, taking as a conceptual reference the Working Paper on Democracy Learning Loop Concept (2024), developed in the framework of SHAPEDEM-EU project.

First, the paper provides an overview of who speaks about Lebanon in Europe, both inside and outside the EU institutions. Second, it maps the contestation of EU democracy support practices, considering whether discursive change has coincided with the three phases outlined in this introduction (post-2005; post-2011; post-2019). Based on the works of Jones and McBeth (2010) and Stone (2012) on narratives in the political and policy spheres, the paper identifies two main clusters of narratives into which to categorise different specific types of contestations. To do this, the paper is based on the qualitative discourse analysis of twenty-nine motions for resolution in the European Parliament between 2005 and 2024, and eight in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in October and November 2024. The data is further enriched by open-source information on EU democracy support to Lebanon.

## **1 Mapping the actors: who speaks in Europe about Lebanon's democracy?**

European actors producing discourse on EU democracy support in Lebanon are multiple. At the institutional level, the European Council, the Council of the EU, the Parliament, and the Commission are the main speakers on the general approach the EU should follow to promote democracy in Lebanon. An additional layer distinguishes between the Commission's bodies located in Brussels' HQs, such as the Middle East office within DG Near, and the EU Delegation in Lebanon. The geographic distance and the different leverage that each body has in the decision-making process contribute to creating differences in building background knowledge and preferences among the various communities of practices (CoP). Discursive nuances among institutional actors can also be observed based on individual positions, for example between political groups in the European Parliament, or between officials such as the EEAS High Representative or the President of the EU Commission. The multilayered architecture of EU institutional actors working on Lebanon becomes further complex when including those operating at a technical level, such as Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), Neighborhood Investment Facility (NIF), the Erasmus+ Programme, the 7th Framework Programme (FP7), the Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe Programmes, and the European Investment Bank (EIB).

In this context, it is very difficult to identify the actors that count the most in making democracy-related decisions on Lebanon within the EU (Interview 7, 2024). This difficulty has much to do with the number of actors that have a voice within the institutions, but also with the strength of the Member States in their capacity to influence the EU's decisions, especially through the European Council and the Council of the EU, France *in primis* (Interview 8, 2024).

Beyond this first circle of EU insiders (composed of the EU institutions, decentralised bodies, and the EU Member States), there is a vast number of non-EU international organisations that cooperate with the EU as recipients of funding or as partners in co-led structures and activities, such as the IOM, the United Nations, the World Bank, or the Council of Europe, for example through shared democracy support projects under the umbrella of the South Programme<sup>1</sup>.

An additional circle of actors includes non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or networks of NGOs that implement democracy support projects funded by the EU, such as [EuroMed Rights](#) or the [European Endowment for Democracy \(EED\)](#). Beyond the EU-funded private actors, there is a world of independent organisations which do not receive direct EU funding and yet seek to support democracy in Lebanon in cooperation with European actors, such as [LIFE Lebanon](#), [Change Lebanon](#), or the [Arab Reform Initiative](#). With their more independent position compared to EU-funded NGOs, these actors are placed in a freer position to contest the EU democracy support malpractices, or lack of practices altogether (Private conversation in Brussels, 2024).

Media outlets, universities, and research institutes compose the next circle of actors promoting specific discourses on EU democracy support in Lebanon. Mainstream media and policy research institutes producing discourse on the topic include [Politico](#), [Euractiv](#), [International Crisis Group \(ICG\)](#), and [Carnegie Europe](#). According to a Lebanon analyst respondent (Interview 8, 2024), [ICG](#) cannot be considered as an insider in EU decision-making, but its voice is heard through the provision of recommendations in public outputs and closed-doors meetings.

Finally, the most difficult circle to categorise and map includes the voices of independent journalists, bloggers, or activists who talk about EU democracy support not (only) through official channels but also through personal websites, social media, and similar informal or personal channels of expression. Among these, an additional difficulty lies in understanding their level of impact on EU decision-making. For example, two respondents—an independent freelance Brussels-based journalist and a Professor teaching in EU-funded programs—argue that they cannot be considered as insiders, but their voice might be indirectly heard in Brussels through informal conversations, interviews, or if some officials read their writings (Interview 1, 2024; Interview 7, 2024).

Though not aiming at comprehensiveness, this section has tried to provide some insights on the universe of actors producing discourse on EU democracy support in Lebanon. The next part of the paper seeks to provide an overview of the discursive contestation to EU democracy support practices by some of the actors identified in this section. Instead of focusing on the identity of the speakers, the next paragraphs will focus on the contents of contestation, by always keeping in mind the overarching question: has the EU learnt and/or can the EU learn from contestation in its (discursive) approach towards democracy support in Lebanon?

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<sup>1</sup> Lebanon joined the South Programme in 2018.

## 2 Mapping the Contestation

This section is based on the qualitative discourse analysis of twenty-nine motions for resolution to the European Parliament raised between January 2005 and September 2024, and eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with a diverse sample of individuals that work *from Europe on Lebanon* (and especially on EU-Lebanon relations), conducted in October and November 2024.

The motions have allowed to identify different types of contestation within the EU institutions (insiders<sup>2</sup>). The interviews have integrated the perspective of voices that have all defined themselves as ‘outsiders’<sup>2</sup> (Interview 1, 2014; Interview 8, 2024; Interview 7, 2024; Interview 2, 2024; Interview 3, 2024; Interview 4, 2024; Interview 5, 2024; Interview 6, 2024). The analysis has allowed to identify two main groups of *morals of the story* on EU democracy support in Lebanon under which the narratives can be categorised, showing different degrees of contestation from the lightest to the strongest:

- 1) ‘Incremental and/or pragmatic narratives’: the EU should do more in line with what has done and/or act flexibly based on the context (the main problem is within Lebanon and/or in the region).
- 2) ‘Copernican revolution narratives’: the EU should do differently (the main problem is within the EU).

### 2.1 The incremental and pragmatic contestation narratives

The ‘incremental narratives’ embrace *morals of the story* by which the EU should do more in support of democracy promotion in Lebanon. In this type of narrative, the objective to support democracy is not put into question. The very moderate contestation here lies in the EU’s ineffectiveness in achieving the expected results and tries to suggest ways through which the EU could act in Lebanon. In these narratives, the EU always emerges as the *hero*, the Lebanese people as the *victims*, and the corrupted elites in Lebanon that prevent change as the *villains*.

A slightly different *morale of the story* presented both in the motions and the interviews is that the EU should act more pragmatically and do what is possible based on local developments and opportunities. To further legitimise the argument that ‘the problem is the Lebanese context’, some respondents have observed that “speaking of democracy promotion in Lebanon is hardly meaningful” (Interview 7, 2024), because of internal structural problems that hamper the correct functioning of the state, of the voting system (Interview 4, 2024) and of the parliament, where it is hardly possible to pass laws that can implement democratisation (Interview 2, 2024). This is why, rather than asking for the EU to do more, this narrative asks the EU to be ‘smarter’ and more pragmatic, implicitly acknowledging that democracy support should not be a fixed priority.

In the European Parliament, most analysed motions embrace either the ‘incremental’ or ‘pragmatic’ narratives. The main change is based on the evolving *setting* from the post-2005 to the post-2019

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<sup>2</sup> From the circle of both more ‘underground’ and ‘mainstream’ media, I interviewed one independent Brussels-based freelance journalist with more than twenty years of experience on Lebanon and its relations with Europe (quoted as Interview 1, 2024), and a Lebanon-based analyst for the mainstream Brussels-based International Crisis Group (Interview 8, 2024). From academia, I interviewed a European Professor specialised in EU-MENA relations with a focus on Lebanon (Interview 7, 2024). From the circle of NGOs and advocacy groups, I interviewed two respondents from the network organisation EuroMed Rights (Interview 2, 2024; Interview 3, 2024), and a practitioner in strategic communication that worked for the EU in Lebanon (Interview 4, 2024). From the circle of non-EU international organisations, I discussed with two members of the Council of Europe (Interview 5, 2024; Interview 6, 2024), that both have worked on projects in Lebanon but are based in different CoE locations in Tunisia and in the North-South Centre in Portugal.

contexts; there is a general shift from the ‘incremental narrative’, with democracy-focused motions interested in promoting democracy and fighting corruption, towards more ‘pragmatic narratives’ increasingly sceptical about the provision of funding in support of the Lebanese institutions altogether. In addition to these general evolving positions, throughout the years some left-wing (GUE/NGL, Verts/ALE, and The Left) and right-wing (ECR and ID) political groups have sporadically expressed stronger contesting voices that slightly changed the predominant *morals of the story* and characters’ distribution presented above. However, in most cases, these groups later replaced their motions with a joint motion in which their ‘outlier’ narratives were absent.

### 2.1.1 Regionalising narrative

In 2005, after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the motion proposed by GUE/NGL ([European Parliament, 2005](#)) differed from the others in explicitly locating the problems of Lebanon within the broader regional framework and addressing Israel as the primary cause of regional instability. Unlike the other groups, GUE/NGL did not explicitly focus on Hezbollah and the corrupted political elite as the *villains* of the story, while this role is more explicitly attributed to Israel. The *moral of the story* insisted that a more active role of the EU should go beyond the investigation of Hariri’s assassination and the monitoring of Lebanese elections to take a stronger regional stance in support of the Middle East peace process.

Despite this greater emphasis on explicitly condemning Israel for the turmoil in Lebanon and in the region, arguing that a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was “likely to normalise relations between all the countries in the region” ([European Parliament, 2005, par.7](#)), with the Israeli withdrawal from the Golan as a pivotal prerequisite for separate peace agreements between Israel, Lebanon and Syria, the motion did not underlie a different view on the role of EU democracy support in Lebanon. Democracy was seen as something that both the Lebanese population and the EU (as *heroes* of the story) wanted, by stressing “the importance of holding democratic and transparent legislative elections” and by reiterating the need for an EU’s increased role in promoting it (‘incremental’ narrative) ([European Parliament, 2005, par.3](#)). The Euro-Mediterranean partnership and similar multilateral initiatives were described as the solution to the problem. The only contestation to the EU’s approach regarded the need to expand its role, rather than putting the basis of the European approach into question. A similar kind of narrative is present in the motion raised by the Verts/ALE in 2006 ([European Parliament, 2006](#)), by the GUE/NGL group in 2008 ([European Parliament, 2008a](#)), by the Left in 2021 ([European Parliament, 2021](#)) and 2023 ([European Parliament, 2023](#)).

### 2.1 Criminalisation narrative

From the other side of the political spectrum, the right-wing UEN group emerged in 2008 ([European Parliament, 2008b](#)) also as a contesting voice. The group urged the EU to add Hezbollah to the terrorist list as an important step toward disarming its militia ([UNSC Res.1559, 2004](#)), but also to restoring the rule of law in Lebanon, thus making a direct link between the need to criminalise Hezbollah and any possible democratic transition in Lebanon (*moral of the story*). This position was however abandoned by the group’s next day decision to withdraw their motion and join a joint motion ([European Parliament, 2008c](#)), which was then adopted with minor amendments as an EU Parliament resolution on 22 May 2008 ([European Parliament, 2008d](#)). However, despite the absence of this criminalisation narrative in the 2008 joint motion and resolution, in 2013, the military branch of Hezbollah was included in the list of terrorist organisations by the Council of the EU ([European Parliament, 2020](#); [European Council, 2024](#)), thus showing some alignment between the positions of the Member States within the Council and the more conservative groups in the Parliament.

In 2021 ([European Parliament, 2021b](#)) and 2023 ([European Parliament, 2023](#)), also the ECR increased its anti-Hezbollah stance compared to the previous years, calling for Hezbollah to be designated “in its entirety” (par. V) as a terrorist organisation, and not only its military branch. In this motion, democracy support was still considered a vital element of the EU’s approach to Lebanon, highlighting that the EU should use the measure of targeted sanctions against Lebanese leaders responsible for “corruption and degradation, including officials implicated in ongoing violations of human rights related to the Beirut port explosions and efforts to undermine accountability” (par. 12). Both in 2021 and in 2023, the group later joined a joint motion in which it abandoned its focus on terrorism.

Differently from the other uses of the criminalisation narrative, the ID group ([European Parliament, 2021c](#)) in 2021 did not translate its contesting language into a more moderate joint motion. The use of a criminalising language here shifted from the focus on terrorism towards Islamism, as the villain was not Hezbollah anymore but Syrian refugees and the EU. The ID group kept openly criticising the use of sanctions by the EU as ineffective and blamed them for having ‘social and humanitarian consequences for the peoples of the states they were aimed at without making any political difference’ (par. M). Moreover, the ID employed a narrative that challenged the international aid provided to Syrian refugees in Lebanon, arguing that “Syrian families are receiving more subsidies than Lebanese families” (par. 4) and underlining that Syrian refugees have “already committed Islamist attacks in Lebanon” (par. 6). In the ID’s narrative, the *villains* are the Syrian refugees, but also the EU Commission for its ambiguity in the use of “EU taxpayer funds” (par. 11), further warning that “destabilisation of the country poses a danger to the EU, specifically in the areas of security and migration” (par. 12). The argument was that the EU, instead of promoting better conditions in Lebanon, has contributed to economic deterioration (through sanctions) and corruption (through a non-transparent use of funds) further exacerbated by the alleged support to Syrian refugees and their Islamist tendencies at the expense of the broader Lebanese population, explicitly referring to the Christian community in Lebanon among the *victims* of the story.

## 2.2 The ‘Copernican revolution(s)’ contestation narratives

Differently from the previous cluster of narratives, the next group emphasises how the EU should do differently because of things that have to do with the EU more than with Lebanon (or the region). The various narratives in this cluster share the assumption that the EU—with different gradations—plays the role of the *villain*.

### 2.2.1 Short-term and self-interested reasoning

Despite the great discursive emphasis given by the EU to democracy support in Lebanon, its role—and underlying motives—have often been contested since the beginning of the Association in the early 2000s. In the post-9/11 international context, the EU was already receiving criticism that its actions in the MENA region had been strongly shaped by the narratives of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Reinforcing the EU’s sense of security by stabilising neighbouring countries was often perceived as the priority compared to democracy support, as it was visible in the closer cooperation the EU was establishing with authoritarian countries, in exchange for their support in counterterrorism activities (Ziadeh, 2009).

Similarly, in the post-2005/2006 Lebanese context, despite the strong emphasis on reforms and democracy support in the official discourse, this narrative argues that the main European focus was to prevent another conflict with Israel, while democracy promotion was already taking a secondary role (Interview 1, 2024). After the Arab uprisings, the EU policies towards Lebanon reinforced the security-

stability nexus, which linked concerns over EU security with policies aimed at stability in the Southern neighbourhood with a clear intent to deal with the refugee crisis originating from the Syrian civil war (Seeberg, 2018).

Since 2019, the issue of the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has become increasingly problematic, due to the aggravating economic situation, which directly affected the Lebanese solidarity expressed towards Syrians. The Lebanese public has increasingly started to look critically at those international donors that were perceived as funding Syrians rather than Lebanese (Interview 8, 2024). The EU's pledge, through the voice of President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen, in May 2024, to donate 1 billion euros to Lebanon, with a large part dedicated to reinforcing the Lebanese army, to strengthen border control, and to support Syrian refugees, further created a negative perception of the EU. The financial assistance package was viewed as a gift to the corrupted elite through a non-conditional provision of such a large amount of money to the government (Interview 4, 2024) (Atallah, 2024). At the same time, it was explicitly interpreted as a way for the EU to delegate migration control to Lebanon, so to avoid further arrivals to Europe ([L'Orient Today, 2024](#)). To many observers, this EU initiative has once and for all shown that the priority of the EU in Lebanon is not democracy promotion but guaranteeing the EU's short-term interests, in this case through border control and migration management (Interview 4, 2024; Interview 3, 2024). The *moral of the story* of this narrative is that the EU has never seriously promoted democracy in Lebanon, but its own evolving interests. Therefore, it needs to completely revise its priorities and reflect on its role as a democracy supporter.

### 2.2.2 Problem of double standards

This narrative highlights how the EU has lost a lot of its credibility in the Middle East in the past few years (Interview 1, 2024). It argues that people in the Middle East believed that the EU was truly interested in democracy support and shared the assumption that having an increased EU presence in their countries was a positive thing (McCloskey-Gholikhany, 2019). However, since the Ukraine war of 2022, and especially after October 7, 2023, the EU has been seen as increasingly more aligned with the US and its voice to have disappeared. Shehadeh adds that “the overall public feeling or public perception of all EU and external actors that they are promoting democracy and human rights has been in doubt because of what we are witnessing since last year” (Interview 2, 2024). The young population especially is seen as increasingly losing hope in what they previously considered as the “leaders of human rights and democracy in the world” (Interview 2, 2024). The Arab youth has been witnessing the different value that is attributed by the EU to the loss of lives in Palestine and Lebanon, compared to the value that is attributed to life and human rights in Ukraine. Also, after Israel's sabotage actions ([Sanger, 2024](#)), targeted killings of Hezbollah's officials, and military invasion of South Lebanon in the Fall of 2024, the EU has been criticised for only having asked for a ceasefire, without pressuring for a stronger stance towards a diplomatic solution through an EU Parliament resolution (De La Feld, 2024) or a more pronounced condemnation of the unlawful Israeli behaviour through retaliatory actions such as the suspension of the EU–Israel Association Agreement (Junyent, 2024). The *moral of the story* of this narrative is that the EU's foreign policy should be more coherent and promote democracy and international law consistently in time and across all geographic contexts.

### 2.2.3 Loss of EU's 'democratic' nature

A similar criticism is raised when considering whether the EU has the legitimacy of self-defining as a democracy supporter *per se*. One respondent explicitly criticises the EU for increasingly disregarding democracy within its borders and therefore being less and less able to present itself as a champion of

democracy abroad (Interview 1, 2024). Other respondents also underline how the complexity of human rights violations within the European territory makes it increasingly difficult to promote human rights abroad (Interview 3, 2024; Interview 4, 2024). The *moral of the story* of this narrative is strongly connected to the previous one, but instead of looking at the incoherence of the EU's foreign policy, it argues that the EU should first promote democracy within its territory and then aim at exporting it abroad.

#### 2.2.4 Lack of clear decision-making and lack of listening

One additional contestation raised against the European Union is the question of too many actors dealing with the Lebanese dossier, spanning from the headquarters in Brussels to the EU Delegation in Beirut (see section 2). According to most respondents, it is very difficult to understand who the decision-makers are, and most of the officials in the Commission or the Delegation are seen as 'following procedures rather than being able to make decisions' (Interview 1, 2024). On the contrary, the EU Member States with higher stakes and influence, such as France, are identified as the main actors making decisions. One respondent notices how, to successfully advocate for democracy support in Lebanon, it is thus necessary to create a dialogue with the key countries that play the most active role in the Council (Interview 3, 2024). For example, after the Beirut blast of 2020, there was huge lobbying towards the EU members states to table a resolution in the Council for a fact-finding mission looking for responsibilities in the blast. There was at the time a lot of coordination between the Lebanese civil society, international organisations, and the European (both EU and non-EU members) embassies in Lebanon. But the EU institutions never proactively replied to these demands, as there was seemingly no appetite to continue in that direction (Interview 2, 2024). The additional problem in this absence of clarity is that in Lebanon the population still sees the EU Delegation as the actor responsible for the EU's actions, despite its lack of decisional power, and this often creates reputational problems for the delegation in its capacity to respond to local criticisms (Interview 4, 2024). At the same time, the lack of coordination is not only the result of the complex EU decision-making processes, but also of political divisions among Member States and political groups that limit the Council's and the Parliament's capacity to work as unified coherent actors not only on democracy support in Lebanon but on EU's decision-making at large (e.g. [Vigneri et al., 2023](#))<sup>3</sup>-

Largely connected to the fragmentation of decision-making in the EU's multilevel democracy support architecture, some respondents contest the lack of EU listening to what the people want, with the EU seen as pushing its agenda (see narrative c) rather than acting on behalf of local needs (Interview 5, 2024). This is viewed as a very different approach from other organisations that work on a more technical level and on demands that arrive from the partner countries (Interview 6, 2024). The EU is said to be very open to cooperation with 'outsiders' at the operational and technical level, but they are seen as very rigid in terms of their own agenda and the possibility of influencing it (Interview 5, 2024). However, it is generally assumed that the relation between external organisations and the EU in Lebanon is at least better than elsewhere in the region, where the EU is even less prone to listening, e.g., in Tunisia (Interview 3, 2024; Interview 6, 2024). The *moral of the story* of this narrative is that the EU actors operating on and in Lebanon should communicate more among themselves and with local actors, so to make more successful decisions both for the Lebanese people and for the EU itself.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the narrative renamed 'Divisions among Member States' in this analysis of EU's changing discursive approach towards asylum seekers Vigneri, Francesco, et al. "The Impact of Narratives on EU policymaking." Bridges, 08 January 2024, <https://www.bridges-migration.eu/publications/the-impact-of-narratives-on-eu-policy-making/>.

### 2.2.5 Lack of effective strategic communication

Another problem linked to the multidimensional composition of the EU actors dealing with Lebanon is that often the EU's communication towards the Lebanese audience is contradictory or simply lacking. The most recent emblematic example refers to the already mentioned visit of the President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to Beirut in May 2024 announcing to pledge 1 billion dollars as socio-economic support to Lebanon ([Ayoub, 2024](#)). The announcement, made by von der Leyen in tandem with the President of Cyprus, dedicated a large part to how the funds would be used for border control and migration management ([European Commission, 2024](#)). In addition to the criticised content of the pledge, the event was considered a huge mediatic blowback for the EU (Stachelhaus, 2024). In stressing that the funds were largely aimed at coping with the Syrian refugees and border control, von der Leyen was answering a European need that should have been addressed towards a European audience. In that case, the President did not coordinate with the EU Delegation before making the public announcement, missing an opportunity to frame the discourse in the most appropriate language, which should have taken into consideration the local context and sensitivities (Interview 4, 2024).

This is only a minor example of the communication problems that the EU faces in Lebanon. Indeed, there is also a lack of communication about positive initiatives of the EU, such as the many projects that it has been promoting throughout its many years of presence in Lebanon. Because of the decentralised nature of the funding that involves a myriad of implementing actors, the EU has often missed the opportunity to present its own success stories (Interview 2, 2024). The *moral of the story* of this narrative is that the EU should not only do better' (narrative *f*) but also learn to communicate better what it already does.

## Conclusions

As shown in the prevailing contesting narratives both among insiders and outsiders, security and border management have taken a central role compared to democracy support and human rights in the EU approach towards Lebanon. This seems to suggest a general lack of learning (Interview 3, 2024) by the EU institutions on how to promote long-term democratisation reforms rather than focusing on short-term security-oriented patches. The conundrum that emerges is not a new one ([EEAS, 2016](#)): is the EU a realpolitik actor with specific interests that can disregard values in the name of political interest, or is the EU a value-based actor? This discussion needs to be taken seriously and honestly within the EU and its decision-makers should be aware of the consequences of each choice. One main problem hindering learning is that it will happen only if it is in line with the interests of the EU (and mostly EU member states) (Interview 1, 2024). Moreover, this paper has shown how even contesting voices express very different *morals of the story* with regards to the pragmatic versus normative view, based on the political and professional positioning of contesting actors and more generally their situatedness. Sometimes the EU has been contested for doing too little and sometimes for doing too much in interfering in the domestic politics of Lebanon. Until now, if the EU has indeed learned something, it has learned to be more pragmatic than normative (Interview 7, 2024).

The EU's preferred narration is that the year 2005—because of the popular mobilisation known as the Cedar Revolution—was a moment of opportunity for democratic change in Lebanon, but the opportunity fell with the rise of Hezbollah. Consistently, the narration continues, the EU has adapted its approach from being democracy-led to security-led (with European security concerns at its core). The pressure to criminalise Hezbollah led the EU Council to unanimously agree to put the group's military wing on the list of terrorist organisations in 2013, at the same time however committing itself

to keep open contact with all political parties. This shift towards a security-led approach has taken the form of identifying the Lebanese army as the most appropriate recipient of the EU's trust and funds.

However, these shifts have not helped increase the accountability of the Lebanese political parties or in general promote more democratisation. As shown, some even argue that the EU's approach to Lebanon has been EU-centred and security-led since the beginning, and it was not the product of a shift in which the EU had to learn to become more pragmatic because of the Lebanese context.

After 2019, in a new moment of promising protests, the EU has preferred working with civil society organisations rather than with the government, seemingly showing to have learned to avoid fuelling corruption through its own funds. The main problem with this change of approach consists in whether the grassroots organisations are in turn able to effectively influence the Lebanese political context and decision-making (Interview 8, 2024). Moreover, in May 2024 the EU again put its own sense of security upfront by returning to promise funds directly to what it has often framed as a corrupted establishment, thus provoking further criticism of the EU's coherence and management of funds.

The lowest moment for the EU in Lebanon that triggered some reflection and discursive change was the May 2024 announcement of the support to Lebanon to keep Syrian refugees there, which was framed by the Commission and the Parliament through normative terms, presenting the issue as a human rights issue, while it was clear to everyone that it was an instance of EU delegating border management to Lebanon. That occasion seemingly triggered learning in the many discussions that took place between the EU institutions and the EU delegation in Beirut after the event (Interview 4, 2025; Interview 8, 2024).

Another small (and interconnected) example of learning seems to have happened after October 7, 2023. Through the youth network of EU Neighbour South, two hundred young people from the region, including Lebanon, wrote a letter to Ursula von der Leyen arguing that the EU statements on Gaza were considered offensive by most people in the Arab world. The letter—which was never published—was taken seriously and high-level meetings were organised to deal with the issue (Interview 3, 2024). This was just one example of the great mobilisation and pressure that has been put on the EU institutions since the beginning of the war on Gaza.

On that occasion, learning can be observed in the fact that the main spokesperson for the EU Commission on the war has informally changed. Initially, the statements were mostly coming from the President of the Commission, with her strongly criticised 'bias' toward Israel ([Wax and Barigazzi, 2023](#)) and her May 2024 mediatic missteps in Beirut. Later, it was the outgoing High Representative Josep Borrell who became the most prominent speaker for the EU on the region, and precisely on Lebanon. According to one respondent, Borrell himself seems to have gone through a process of individual learning since the beginning of the war (Interview 7, 2024). He started addressing the Lebanese people in a much more sensitive manner, as was visible in the statement released on 18 September 2024 after the alleged Israeli-led explosion of electronic devices. He called "the indiscriminate method used" as "unacceptable due to the inevitable and heavy collateral damages among civilians", argued that "whoever is behind these attacks aims to spread terror in Lebanon" and called for an independent investigation ([EEAS, 2024](#)). This language was completely different from the one used by Von der Leyen throughout 2023 and 2024.

Despite the minor sparks of learning shown by the EU Commission, it seems clearer in the current context that the Commission has even less role than before, as it is the Council and the Member States that drive the discussion on how to engage the region more broadly. Moreover, in the Parliament, the

political groups have become increasingly aligned with the Member States' positions, thus making the discussion on human rights and democracy in Lebanon much more difficult and hijacked by security-dominated discussions (Interview 3, 2024).

In the meantime, the possibilities for learning also depend on the architecture of communities of practices and their willingness to engage among themselves. The level of cooperation between actors involved in democracy and human rights promotion in Lebanon and the EU has depended on personal chemistry with the people on the ground in the EU delegation (Interview 5, 2024), thus further complicating the fragmentation of decision-making and the possibilities of deep learning.

The role of actors that are neither insiders nor outsiders, like NGOs that have a continuous open discussion with the EU institutions, remains pivotal in triggering possibilities of learning. Advocacy and dialogue stand as ways to exercise influence on EU decision-making, with these independent actors being in a position that allows to present constructive contestation without ever stopping both the cooperation with the EU institutions and with actors on the ground, so to fill the often perceived disconnect between the decisions taken in the HQs and the local realities and needs. As one respondent argues, the continuous pressure on the EU insiders does not mean asking the EU to change its nature or approach but to increase its accountability and respect for the already existing EU treaties and international law (Interview 3, 2024).

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