



Comparative report on the feeding and impact of the Democracy Learning Loop

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Abstract

This comparative report is prepared under the framework of the EU-funded Project ‘Rethinking and Reshaping the European Union’s (EU) Democracy Support in its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods’ (SHAPEDEM-EU) within Work Package 2. The package explores the democracy-related dynamics in the Eastern Neighbourhood over the last decade. The data for the report were collected in 2023-2025 through the collaborative effort of all partners involved in WP2 from: *the literature review* on local democracy perceptions in the Eastern Neighbourhood, conducted in January-August 2023; *online surveys* in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, organised in March-July 2023; *focus groups* in all case study countries, apart from Georgia, in February-September 2024; *interviews* in Armenia in September 2024; and *citizen juries* in Ukraine in May 2025. The countries of the region were divided into two groups: Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine as primary case studies, while Belarus, Azerbaijan and Moldova as additional cases. Nonetheless, due to the constantly changing situation in the region, the project team faced challenges conducting fieldwork in some of the countries, which resulted in cancelling focus groups in Georgia, organising online surveys in Moldova instead of Armenia and holding citizen juries only in Ukraine.

Based on the analysis of the data, conducted by the WP2 Team, led by P12-the University of Warwick, we have compared perceptions of democracy in the region, democratic practices of communities of practice and EU democracy support (DS) in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries to identify five areas that can boost the feeding and impact of the democracy learning loops, an innovative model, which approaches democracy support as a collective learning effort on the side of all involved parties. These areas include: partnerships between different levels of domestic and EU actors, involved in democracy building; more coherent and strategy-based EU DS programmes throughout the region, but in particular in Azerbaijan, Belarus and Georgia; innovative ways of cooperation where the national governments, like in Azerbaijan and Belarus, are authoritarian; more DS programmes in education and media literacy, aimed at combating mis/disinformation; and more support for civil society, especially beyond its organized parts, particularly on a community/local level.

1 Introduction

This comparative report is prepared under the framework of the EU-funded Project ‘Rethinking and Reshaping the European Union’s (EU) Democracy Support in its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods’ (SHAPEDEM-EU) within Work Package 2 (WP2), led by P12 – University of Warwick (UoW). The project’s key objectives are to rethink, reshape, and review the EU’s democracy support policies, while elaborating and pilot-testing an innovative Democracy Learning Loop (DLL) model. The Democracy Learning Loop approaches democracy support as a collective learning effort on the side of all involved parties and aims to disrupt outdated patterns of one-way democracy promotion. Instead, it engages all state and non-state actors on the sides of the EU and its partners to create a responsive and reciprocal democracy learning endeavour.

WP2 explores the democracy-related dynamics in the Eastern Neighbourhood over the last decade by studying local expectations and practices of democracy, democratic politics, and international efforts in democracy support with the emphasis on the EU amidst multi-layered practices of contestation. The countries of the region are divided into two groups: Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine are primary case studies, while Belarus, Azerbaijan and Moldova are additional cases. The report is prepared as part of *Task 2.4 “Comparative analysis, identify ‘agents of change’, contribute to the pilot testing of the Democracy Learning Loop between the EU, societal groups and national decision makers”*. The task uses the secondary and primary data, collected within WP2 to *explore how the EU’s practices of democracy support can be improved*.

The data for the report were collected in 2023-2025 through the collaborative effort of all partners involved in WP2: *the literature review* on local democracy perceptions in the Eastern Neighbourhood, conducted in January-August 2023; *online surveys* in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, organised in March-July 2023; *focus groups* in all case study countries, apart from Georgia, in February-September 2024; *interviews* in Armenia in September 2024; and *citizen juries* in Ukraine in May 2025.

The report proceeds as follows: 2 Description of Activities outlines the process of data collection, methodology applied for the analysis of the data and limitations of the research; 3 Results compares perceptions, practices and EU DS support in the countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood to identify areas that could improve the feeding and impact of the DLL; 4 Deviation summary mentions key changes, implemented by the WP2 team while conducting research, while 5 Conclusions offers a summary of the findings and work concluded.

2 Description of Activities

The analysis in this report is based on the entirety of research activities, carried out within Work Package 2, carried out between 2023 and 2025. To understand how a democracy learning loop can be initiated between the EU and states of the Eastern Neighbourhood, WP2 studied:

- Perceptions of democracy in the region;
- Practices of democracy, with a special focus on self-organisation; and
- EU democracy support.

Local perceptions were studied to uncover democratic knowledge, which according to the model of DLL, forms ‘the tacit practical background knowledge shaping democratic practices and being shaped by them’ (Archainer and Pace 2024: 7). Practices of democracy represent the internalisation of the existing democratic knowledge and were studied primarily in the context of civil society and media in

the Eastern Neighbourhood countries, approached here as communities of practice. Finally, the European Union support for democracy was assessed from the point of view of the local populations and experts.

2.1 Data collection

To access the local views on how democracy is perceived and practiced in the Eastern Neighbourhood, WP2 developed a multidimensional research programme, which offered an opportunity to take snapshots of the local contexts from different levels and angles. First of all, in January-August 2023, P12-UoW coordinated the efforts of P1- Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU), P2- Carnegie Europe Foundation (CEF), P3-Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), P4- Roskilde University (RUC), P6- Jagiellonian University in Kraków (JUK), P7- National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NaUKMA) and P9- Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP-CSF) to *review secondary data*, covering the previous decade of democracy support in the Eastern Neighbourhood. The review, that focused primarily on existing surveys and questionnaires, laid the foundation for *online surveys* on local perceptions and practices of democracy in three case studies – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, implemented by P7-NaUKMA in *March-July 2023*. The researchers selected a random sample of all possible mobile phone numbers in each country: 1228 in Georgia, 600 in Moldova and 997 in Ukraine. The results were weighted according to the latest available official data on the distribution of the population by sex, age, region and type of settlement. In Georgia, the sample was also refined by education level and ethnicity according to the 2014 census. The surveys were designed on the basis of Likert-scale to incorporate 28 statements, which thematically focused on democratic knowledge, practices and EU democracy support in the three studied countries.

Given the limitations of quantitative methodology, *focus groups and group interviews* were then organized in *February-September 2024* to delve deeper into senses and meanings of democracy, civic engagement and EU support in the Eastern Neighbourhood. They were carried out by P7-NaUKMA in all countries, covered by the policy, apart from Georgia, and included civil society and media representatives. The target audience was selected on the basis of the SHAPEDEM-EU's definition of *democracy as practice* and the logic that these categories are not only knowledge-holders but also practitioners of democracy who have benefited from EU democracy support and can look back to experiences of interaction with the EU to assess its behavioural and discursive practices. Questions for focus groups discussions (FGDs) were divided into four categories, focusing on: (1) the participants' understanding of democracy, (2) relations between different communities of practice, (3) democratic practices and processes prevalent locally and (4) the gaps in the EU's Democracy Support (DS) practices and policies in the target countries. Overall, there had been 13 FGs in which 67 people participated: Armenia, Belarus and Ukraine had three FGDs each, while Moldova and Azerbaijan had two discussions each, with the latter taking the format of a group interview.

Additional insights were gathered through online *interviews in Armenia and citizen juries in Ukraine*. In Armenia, interviews with civil society representatives, human rights defenders and other relevant actors were conducted by P12-UoW and P9- EaP-CSF in September 2024. They mainly dealt with EU-Armenian relations through the prism of democracy promotion but have also provided some important local insights on democracy and democracy support in Armenia in general. In Ukraine, two citizen juries were held in May 2025 by P7-NaUKMA with residents of small towns (less than 50 thousand) and rural communities. Each group had two meetings over the course of 2 weeks and consisted of 12 persons of different age, sex, social, educational and professional background from different parts of Ukraine (but only from the communities in East-South of Ukraine, Centre-North of Ukraine, West of Ukraine that

are under the government control). Thus, the total number of citizens taking part in citizen juries was 24: 12 men and 12 women. The first meetings focused on civic engagement and democratic practices at the local level from a theoretical point of view, while the second round was dedicated to finding ways to enhance the effectiveness of civic engagement instruments and the level of meaningful participation of residents in their communities' self-governance.

The table below summarizes how the data were collected in different states of the Eastern Neighbourhood.

Eastern Neighbourhood country	Data collection methods
Armenia	Literature review Focus groups Interviews
Azerbaijan	Literature review Group interviews
Belarus	Literature review Focus groups
Georgia	Literature review Online surveys
Moldova	Literature review Focus groups
Ukraine	Literature review Online surveys Focus groups Citizen juries

2.2 Methodology

The data collected through literature reviews, online surveys, focus groups, interviews (group and individual) and citizen juries have been used for a number of deliverables under the framework of the SHAPEDEM-EU Project. Below, we summarise the methodology, applied in this report to analyse all these data sources.

Thematic analysis was used with the literature review to identify key understandings of democracy and democracy support in the Eastern Neighbourhood. This has informed the design of online surveys in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, which approached practices of democracy as a collection of intergenerational knowledge, founded on cultural values and traditions, and socio-cultural imaginary of the future, defined as a 'good life', while putting the emphasis on the local actors. The collected data was analysed through the frequency analysis, regression models, correlations and two types of factor analysis: Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and Principal Component Analysis (PCA). These methods uncovered similarities and differences between the local perceptions and practices of democracy in the studied countries but also highlighted the need to investigate further participatory practices in the region, with an emphasis on self-governance. That is why we developed FGDs and group interviews to explore how democracy in general and EU democracy support in particular were perceived through the lenses of local democratic knowledge and contextualize local narratives on democracy support and contestation. The gathered data was then analysed using the method of thematic analysis and MAXQDA software to identify, map and explain local perceptions of democracy, democratic values, democratic practices, and external democracy support in each country. Similarly, thematic analysis was applied to citizen juries to draw policy recommendations both for Ukrainian

stakeholders and for the EU for enhancing civic engagement and its instruments in Ukraine and the level of meaningful participation of Ukrainians in self-governance.

Finally, local democratic knowledge, democratic practices and EU democracy support in all the studied countries were compared in a focused and structured manner across six countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood.

2.3 Limitations

While the report deals with all countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Although WP2 studies the whole of the Eastern Neighbourhood, three of its countries are approached as primary case studies – Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine, and the rest as additional cases. Nonetheless, due to the fluid and constantly changing situation in the region, even the primary cases could not be investigated in the same way or to the same extent. Ukraine introduced martial law, after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, which placed limitations on how P7-NaUKMA, the partner responsible for fieldwork within WP2, could conduct research activities within the country and the region. Georgia has been going through a political crisis and civil unrest in the aftermath of the foreign agents' law adoption in spring 2024 and parliamentary elections in autumn 2024, which meant it was impossible to conduct focus groups in the country. In Belarus, focus groups were organised with civil society in exile, while in Moldova and Azerbaijan, researchers encountered reluctance among the respondents to engage deeply with some questions.

There are **timeframe** limitations, too. In this report, the primary data refers to the present, i.e. 2023-2025 years, and the secondary data (existing research) focuses mostly on the last decade.

As this is a research project funded by the EU, there might be an unconscious bias towards support EU norms and values.

3 Results

Since the late 2010s, the traditional way of thinking about democracy as mechanistic and teleological (Carothers 2002), shifted towards a more nuanced and even heuristic engagements with the concept premised on its local vernacular meanings. The latter considerably expanded the epistemological boundaries of the concept, ensuing its comprehensive pluralisation and empirical contextualisation, including widening the debate to bring in novel and more-encompassing concepts such as a **democracy learning loop- DLL** (Sadiki and Saleh 2021; Archainer and Pace 2024), and **resilience as self-governance** (Korosteleva and Petrova 2022; Korosteleva 2025, forthcoming).

A Democracy Learning Loop (DLL) concept³ aims to generate a shared knowledge and understanding of democracy with an active input from all parties involved. All participants must be prepared to: 1) recognize that in order to break free from mental mappings, a process of de-learning and un-learning may be required; 2) actively listen and take into consideration all other participants; 3) recognize that the knowledge acquired is influenced by and infused with culturally embedded understandings; 4) recognize that the social context affects learning practices; and 5) devote enough time and resources to the process. Therefore, the essential drive to respond to lessons learnt about pluralized, localized, and contextualized democratic practices—both within the EU and in the Neighbourhoods—defines the democracy learning loop.

Applying such a loop requires stakeholders to recognize that democracy support is an open-ended iterative process in which all participants participate in and gain from a continuous learning process, even though this process may encounter obstacles or democracy might be contested. In the project,

DLL is further supplemented by the use of the ‘community of practice’ concept, which presumes situating DLL in different contexts, that are connected to the practice of democracy. Within WP2, we further complemented the DLL and CoP with the concept of resilience pertaining to the self-organization of communities and the notion of community of relations, in response to various challenges including conflicts, war, or election rigging etc., with a purpose of altering the unsatisfactory situation to a more sustainable future.

To understand how DLL can function in the EU-eastern Neighbourhood relations, our research first focused on the meanings of democracy in the states of the region and the values it is based on. We found out that in most countries, *democracy was associated with practices of both the state and citizens*, though in Azerbaijan, which currently represents an authoritarian regime, it was primarily linked to state activities and understood simply as an electoral regime. Ukraine and Moldova were most closely aligned in associating democracy with freedoms and citizen’s power. While in all countries the *values*, promoted by the EU, such as equality and the rule of law, were recognized as important, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan also emphasized the role of traditional values, such as hospitality, patriotism, and faith. What is more, over 46% of respondents in Moldova and 38% in Georgia believed that European values were threatening their traditional values. At the same time, interviews and FDGs demonstrated that there is very little agreement as to what constitutes European values and why they are seen as a threat. This indicates a clear need for both the EU and local actors from the Eastern Neighbourhood to work together to identify *what values need to be nurtured and how this can be achieved as part of democracy support*. This is an area that will require not just learning, but also de- and unlearning from all actors involved.

To better understand democracy as a practice, we explored such *communities of practice* as state and local/regional institutions, civil society, which includes both organized elements such as non-governmental organizations and non-organized ones, e.g. grassroots and volunteer movements, and media. While throughout the region democratic credentials of state intuitions have been questioned, and in Azerbaijan and Belarus seen as non-existent, our research uncovered that local and regional institutions and self-organization that can take various forms (from electoral protests in Belarus to volunteer support of the troops in Ukraine) are considered to be of vital importance for democracy in the region. At the same time, our respondents were generally dissatisfied with the way *local practices of democracy are supported in the Eastern Neighborhood by the EU*, with the latter showing bias towards cooperation with well-established NGOs and national level institutions. Nonetheless, some learning on part of the EU was evident in its engagement with local and regional state intuitions in parts of the region, e.g. Ukrainian reform of decentralization. The EU’s role for democracy in the eastern Neighbourhood has also been seen as important in all countries, even in Azerbaijan, where it was suspended.

Country	Understanding of Democracy	Democratic Practices	EU democracy support
Armenia	Democracy requires both government accountability and citizen involvement, underpinned by values like equality and the rule of law. Still, democratic values should be adapted to local	Self-organisation is a crucial instrument to tackle social problems and raise awareness of them, albeit in Armenia it is aimed primarily at local issues. While the	The EU’s support for democracy has been playing a major role in the development of Armenia, especially in the area of youth policies, gender equality, and countering domestic violence.

Country	Understanding of Democracy	Democratic Practices	EU democracy support
	contexts rather than solely defined by European standards.	state – civil society relations should be cooperative, currently they are confrontational due to a lack of trust.	The EU is not demanding enough of the state, engaged with local actors in a limited way, and there is a lack of monitoring and inspection when it comes to crucial reforms, e.g. of judicial and educational systems.
Azerbaijan	Democracy is primarily understood as an electoral regime, but values and institutions (foremost, opposition) are also important. Traditional values need to be taken into account.	Local self-governance is a prominent example of people's self-organisation which, according to respondents, is essential for democracy.	The EU tried to play a major role in the development of democracy in Azerbaijan, including in public administration and school system reforms, but the cooperation with the EU has been suspended. Not enough engagement with civil society overall.
Belarus	Democracy is associated with opportunities, participation, and influence.	There is no democracy without self-organization, especially in the long run. BUT: self-organisation also exists in non-democratic and authoritarian regimes as it is in human nature. At the same time, civil society's role is that of a watchdog.	While some credited the EU with keeping the discourse about a potential democracy in Belarus alive, others criticized its policies. EU's democracy support lacks consistency and strategic thinking. Slowness and the lack of flexibility are other problems that respondents see in the EU's work.
Georgia	Democracy is seen as the best political system for the country and the country's history is believed by the majority (over 80%) to have laid foundations for democracy. European values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights are shared by most of the population, while simultaneously traditional values are considered to be threatened by the EU.	Self-organization is important for democracy. Civic engagement on the local level is a contribution to democracy.	European values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights are shared by most in Georgia. The EU demands the government to be more democratic but needs more engagement with local actors.

Country	Understanding of Democracy	Democratic Practices	EU democracy support
Moldova	Democracy is associated with equality, freedom, and universal human rights. European values are important, but traditional values are considered to be threatened by them.	Self-organization is considered necessary for democracy and is perceived as a value, a right, and a part of society.	The EU makes an important contribution to democracy. More control over the implementation of programs and their results is needed for local actors. EU needs to do more research on Moldova's social and historical context and engage in a dialogue with local population on the ways in which it supports Moldova.
Ukraine	Democracy is associated with freedoms and citizens' power and representation.	Civil society is very important and often takes on the functions of the state. It should also be a watchdog. Self-organisation is of crucial importance for democracy.	EU support is important for Ukrainian democracy. The EU was criticized for poor practicality, avoiding precise examples and clear-cut issues. It should also focus more on education.

Based on our findings, it is recommended that the DLL model for the EU-Eastern Neighbourhood should focus on:

- developing partnerships between different levels of domestic and EU actors, involved in democracy building, going beyond the national level and creating space for regional and local actors (as demonstrated by survey results in Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine);
- making EU DS programmes more coherent and strategy-based throughout the region, but in particular in Azerbaijan, Belarus and Georgia;
- innovative ways of cooperation where the national governments are authoritarian or adopted a hostile stance towards the EU, like in Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Georgia;
- developing more DS programmes in education, particularly civic education within communities, as well as more programmes in media literacy aimed at combating mis/disinformation and exploration of values, underpinning democracy locally and the EU as suggested by surveys in Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova;
- offering more support for informal parts of civil society, as demonstrated by data from all studied countries.

4 Deviations Summary

Some aspects of data collection have presented certain challenges. Online surveys were organized in Moldova instead of Armenia due to high costs of the latter. In the process of organizing focus group discussions, several challenges, beyond the team's control, impaired the timely organization of the fieldwork. In spring-summer 2024, Georgia began to experience peaceful public protests in relation to the adoption of the so-called foreign agents law; the protests and governmental crack down on civil society made it impossible to organize fieldwork in these circumstances. In Azerbaijan, there were

difficulties with recruitment of the participants due to the authoritarian nature of the regime. Similarly, in Belarus, the authoritarian environment of Lukashenka's regime did not allow for a safe participation of the in-country discussants, and the exiled civil society, academic and media representatives had to be involved. In addition, due to the ongoing war and restrictions on financial transactions outside Ukraine, NaUKMA had to recruit moderators within the country, to conduct FGDs across the Eastern neighbourhood bar Belarus. In addition, citizen juries could be organized in Ukraine only.

5 Conclusions

The report is prepared by SHAPEDEM-EU Project's WP 2 as part of Task 2.4 conducting comparative analysis of the research findings and contributing to the pilot testing of the Democracy Learning Loop between the EU, societal groups and national decision makers. The task used the secondary and primary data, collected from *the literature review* on local democracy perceptions in the Eastern Neighbourhood in January-August 2023; *online surveys* in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova in March-July 2023; *focus groups* in all case study countries, apart from Georgia, in February-September 2024; *interviews* in Armenia in September 2024; and *citizen juries* in Ukraine in May 2025.

Local perceptions and practices of democracy were studied alongside EU democracy support to identify areas, through which the model of DLL, developed within the project's WP1, could be applied within the Eastern Neighbourhood, allowing both local and EU actors to engage in an open-ended process of continuous learning. Our analysis uncovered that despite many differences between the studied states in terms of democratic development, there were also many similarities in the ways democracy was perceived and practiced. In terms of perceptions, in most countries, democracy was seen as both an electoral regime and a people's power. Its visions were also closely aligned with the values, promoted by the EU, while four states - Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan – saw them as poorly adjusted to the local contexts. The biggest similarity among the states, however, has been the importance of self-organisation as a democratic practice in the region. Similarly, the respondents from all the states were unanimous in seeing the EU as an important actor of democracy support, though they still found many flaws with its approaches.

Based on our findings, we envisage a constantly developing democracy learning loop between the EU, national leaders and local stakeholders, which prioritizes: multi-level partnerships that recognize the importance of regional and local actors for democracy; coherent and strategy-driven programmes with bold yet concrete objectives; provision of democracy support even if the authorities are opposed to the idea of democracy, like in Belarus and Azerbaijan, which will require innovation and flexibility; the use of education as a tool for combating threats against democracy and closer cooperation with non-traditional parts of civil society, that are normally left behind by the EU and other international donors.

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

Primary Data

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

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

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

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

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

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

Online surveys on Ukraine’

UA-CJ1-2025 citizen jury in Ukraine

UA-CJ2-2025 citizen jury in Ukraine