



Policy Paper

**Rethinking EU Democracy Support:
Beyond the 'democracy vs autocracy' debate**

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Authors: Moussa Bourekba (CIDOB), Samuele Carlo Abrami (CIDOB)

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Introduction

For the first time in over two decades, the number of autocracies in the world surpassed that of democracies (Nord et al., 2025). This global trend is acutely visible in the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods, where countries such as Belarus, Tunisia, and Georgia have undergone significant democratic backsliding, often under the influence of external actors. In addition to these challenges, the EU's democracy support (EU DS) efforts are put to the test by two major wars – Ukraine and Gaza – both tied to the questions of sovereignty and credibility of liberal democratic norms in the face of protracted conflict. The EU's inconsistent responses to these crises have further eroded its credibility, fuelling accusations of double standards and enabling external actors to further contest its normative influence.

Against this backdrop, this policy paper draws on three years of research conducted within the SHAPEDEM-EU project to examine the role of non-EU external actors in the EU's Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods in shaping dynamics of (de)democratisation. It challenges the conventional binary between democracy supporters and autocracy promoters, revealing a more complex picture in which actors' practices often diverge from their regime type and normative claims.

The findings highlight that the nature of an actor's regime, whether democratic or authoritarian, does not determine the type of support it provides. Put simply, being a democratic actor does not necessarily entail support for democratic values, just as authoritarian regimes do not necessarily engage in autocracy support. In practice, interests, strategic calculations, and geopolitical imperatives often take precedence over normative commitments. This policy paper identifies three key findings to understand the role of external actors in the field of de(democratisation) in the EU's Neighbourhoods:

- 1. Competing narratives and models.** Authoritarian actors such as China, Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia deploy or reinforce alternative models of governance that challenge EU normative influence. Fuelled by narratives denouncing Western imperialism, hypocrisy, and the imposition of values, these models often emphasise sovereignty, stability, and development, portraying EU democracy support as foreign interference or regime change. Thus, **there is a need for the EU to invest in strategic communication in ways that resonate in its neighbourhoods.**
- 2. Mechanisms of democracy resistance and prevention.** Both intentional and unintentional strategies – ranging from authoritarian diffusion to authoritarian collaboration resilience of autocratic regimes, including autocracy support – can significantly counter democratisation dynamics. Regional organisations also play a dual role, either reinforcing democratic norms or legitimising authoritarian practices through token compliance. This suggests **the need for the EU to anticipate and mitigate indirect forms of authoritarian influence to maximise the impact of its DS efforts.**
- 3. The role of local perceptions.** Quantitative and qualitative data on local perceptions show that the attractiveness and legitimacy of non-EU actors depend largely on their discursive and behavioural practices during critical junctures, and how these practices compete with or contest EU practices in its neighbourhoods. These perceptions vary across countries and significantly influence the credibility of EU DS efforts. **Understanding how external actors**

are perceived is thus essential to identify entry points for engagement, build coalitions, and tailor EU DS strategies in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods.

Building on these findings, this policy paper offers policy recommendations for the EU to adopt a context-specific approach to democracy support. It begins by challenging the binary categorisation of actors based on regime type, then explores the competing narratives and models that undermine EU influence, as well as the mechanisms through which democracy support is resisted or prevented. Finally, it provides policy recommendations to improve EU DS in its neighbourhoods.

Beyond the Binary: Interests over Ideals

The assumption that democratic regimes are natural allies in promoting democracy, while authoritarian regimes are inherently opposed to it, has proven analytically insufficient (Bourekba & Arco Escriche, 2024; Abrami et al., 2025). Our research reveals that interests often prevail over normative commitments, and that external actors' behaviour in the neighbourhoods often diverges from their regime type.

Democratic actors such as the United States and Türkiye have, at times, contributed to authoritarian accommodation or diffusion. In the Southern Neighbourhood, US democracy promotion has been constrained by strategic priorities such as counterterrorism and energy security, resulting in support for regimes that undermine democratic norms. Türkiye's authoritarian drift since 2013 has diminished the appeal of its earlier "Turkish model" and contributed to authoritarian diffusion in neighbouring countries.

Conversely, authoritarian actors do not always engage in autocracy promotion. China's approach in the Southern Neighbourhood, for example, prioritises stability and economic development over regime type. Its support for non-democratic governments is often driven by pragmatic concerns rather than ideological alignment. Similarly, despite being an authoritarian regime, Qatar has contributed to democracy support in Egypt and Tunisia, albeit selectively: its backing of Islamist actors was driven not only by ideological affinities but also by a broader strategy of regional influence and regime self-preservation. Finally, in several instances, regional organisations such as the Arab League and the African Union have instrumentalised pro-democracy rhetoric to justify regime change or to support processes of authoritarian restoration.

This complexity calls for a more differentiated understanding of democracy support and democracy prevention, one that moves beyond regime labels and focuses on the practices, motivations, and interests of external actors.

Competing Narratives, Alternative Models, and EU Credibility in Question

A key challenge to EU democracy support lies in the increasing number of competing narratives and governance models promoted by external actors. Anchored in principles such as sovereignty, non-interference and respect for cultural differences, these narratives aim at countering the EU's emphasis on universal democratic values and liberal norms.

Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia have developed 'models' or alternatives that resonate with certain elites and publics in the EU's neighbourhoods. Russia positions itself as a norm-contester,

instrumentalising regional organisations and exploiting interdependencies in energy, security, and other sectors, to promote and support authoritarianism in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

In the Southern Neighbourhood, China has emerged as a model of authoritarian modernisation, presenting itself as evidence that authoritarian governance can deliver economic development and, ultimately, stability. Driven by fears of ‘democratic contagion’ and hostility to political Islam, Saudi Arabia’s behaviour in the post-2011 Arab uprisings promoted the narrative that these mass demonstrations stemmed from a lack of economic development, and it has deployed a range of political and economic instruments to support counter-revolutionary actors.

These narratives are not limited to authoritarian actors. Democratic states and organisations have also contributed to further question the relevance, legitimacy, and sincerity of democracy support. In the Southern Neighbourhood, the US and EU opposition to the results of the 2006 general elections in Palestine and the NATO-led intervention in Libya are instances where democracy support has been conflated with regime change or instrumentalised for other strategic interests. More and more, the EU itself has prioritised migration control and stability over democratic governance, as seen in its recent engagement with Tunisia.

In this context, democracy support is not only a matter of policy instruments but also of narrative credibility. The growing traction of alternative models, along with the inconsistencies and contradictions of democratic actors, has further eroded the EU’s normative appeal, especially in the Southern Neighbourhood. To remain a relevant actor in these spaces of competition, the EU should not only ensure coherence between its stated values and external actions but also invest in strategic communication to address anti-democratic models and their promoters.

Resisting Democratisation: Authoritarian Instruments and Alliances

Several external actors have deployed distinct instruments and strategies to resist or prevent democratisation in the EU’s neighbourhoods. The mechanisms identified in the SHAPEDEM-EU research are diverse in form and intent, and often operate through indirect, decentralised, or non-coordinated means. They correspond to different types of strategies, such as authoritarian diffusion/learning, authoritarian enabling, authoritarian collaboration, democracy resistance and democracy prevention. Some of these strategies are deliberately aimed at resisting democratic change while other produce such effects unintentionally.

While authoritarian diffusion often occurs indirectly, mainly through the emulation of governance models, authoritarian enabling and collaboration involve more deliberate strategies. In the EU’s neighbourhoods, authoritarian enabling often involves financial, diplomatic, or technological support to both state and non-state actors to strengthen authoritarian regimes/practices without overtly promoting autocracy. By contrast, authoritarian collaboration often takes the form of alliances between external actors and authoritarian regimes (or non-state actors) to preserve shared economic, political, and geopolitical interests.

Authoritarian diffusion

Actor	Country/Neighbourhood	Instruments	What Happened
Türkiye	Southern Neighbourhood	Political model, discursive influence	Türkiye's post-2013 authoritarian drift weakened the appeal of the "Turkish model" and indirectly encouraged illiberal trends.
Russia	Belarus, Georgia, Moldova	Media control, NGO laws, surveillance	Russia's domestic model inspired similar restrictions on civil society and media in neighbouring countries.
China	Southern Neighbourhood	Authoritarian modernisation model	China's economic development under authoritarianism legitimised non-democratic governance as a path to prosperity and stability.

Authoritarian Enabling

Actor	Country/Neighbourhood	Instruments	What Happened
Iran	Lebanon, Palestine	Military, financial, ideological support	Proxy alliances (Hezbollah, Hamas) which contribute to project influence, obstruct reform, and reinforce elite control.
Saudi Arabia	Southern Neighbourhood	Financial aid, diplomatic support	Used economic, diplomatic, and digital tools to support counter-revolutionary actors, derail democratic transitions, and counter the influence of political Islam.
Russia	Belarus	Security guarantees, diplomatic and financial support	Backed Lukashenko during 2020 protests, helping suppress dissent.

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Authoritarian collaboration

Actor	Neighbourhood	Instruments	What Happened
China	Southern Neighbourhood	Strategic partnership, infrastructure investment	Reinforced authoritarian governance through economic and political ties.
Russia	Eastern Neighbourhood	Military intervention and support, disinformation and cyber undermining; diplomatic cover	Reinforced authoritarian governance through economic, diplomatic, and political ties.

In addition to these mechanisms, other strategies corresponding to democracy prevention and democracy resistance have been identified. In the Eastern Neighbourhood, Russia's efforts to counter democratisation mainly relies on economic coercion, political subversion, and support for autocratic elites to counter democratisation. In the Southern Neighbourhood, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states tend to use financial and diplomatic tools to derail democratic transitions, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia. Regional organisations such as the Arab League, the African Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation have also been instrumentalised by certain member States to counter external pressure in favour of democratisation and, in certain instances, to legitimise authoritarian restoration. Furthermore, even norm-building bodies like the OSCE and the Council of Europe face constraints when member states invoke sovereignty and non-interference to block democracy support.

The variety of the mechanisms deployed by non-EU external actors, combined with their tendency to resort to symbolic compliance, makes them difficult to counter through conventional policy instruments.

External Democracy Support: Between Cooperation and Constraints

In the realm of democracy support, the non-EU actors analysed primarily rely on technical and normative instruments to support democracy in the EU's neighbourhoods. These includes, among other, institutional reform assistance, electoral assistance, civil society empowerment, norm-setting and norm-building, conditional aid, and strategic partnerships.

Examples of democracy support strategies

Actor	Country/Neighbourhood	Instruments	What Happened
US	Eastern Neighbourhood	Aid related to anti-corruption, transparency and democratic governance; engagement with & support to CSOs	Strengthened transparency, democratic governance and pluralism, especially in post-revolutionary contexts. Support often in synergy with EU efforts.
NATO	Georgia, Ukraine, Tunisia	Governance reform in defence/security sectors	Supported integrity and accountability in the security sector, indirectly reinforcing democratic governance.
CoE	Eastern Neighbourhood	Legal standards, human rights charters	Promoted democratic norms, human rights and rule of law; faced resistance in authoritarian contexts.
OSCE	Eastern Neighbourhood	Election monitoring, media freedom assessments	Supported democratic standards; constrained by sovereignty claims from member states.
UN	Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood	Development aid, electoral assistance, support to institutional reform	Provided technical assistance aligned with democratic goals.

While certain state actors – such as the US or Türkiye – have pursued democracy support as part of broader foreign policy agendas in specific countries and periods, regional organisations – such as the African Union, the Arab League, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and the United Nations –, tend to focus on norm-setting, norm-building and technical assistance. The effectiveness of these instruments depends not only on external factors (local receptivity, geopolitical dynamics) but also on internal organisational dynamics, including the ability of certain actors to veto or dilute democracy-related norms and initiatives.

Diverging Expectations and Perceptions of Democracy Support

Understanding how external actors are perceived in the EU's neighbourhoods is essential for designing effective EU DS policies. Our quantitative and qualitative research sought to identify correlations between these actors' behaviour during specific turning points (e.g., Arab uprisings,

war in Ukraine, genocide in Gaza) and local perceptions in six countries of study: Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia.

Our findings highlight significant variation across countries and regions:

- In **Armenia**, the pivot away from Russia is primarily driven by security concerns rather than ideological alignment. Democracy is seen as derivative of stability, and Western actors are expected to support security-related reforms and institutional capacity-building, particularly in the judiciary and defence sectors.
- In **Georgia**, civil society tends to be pro-democratic and aligned with EU values, but the ruling party has adopted increasingly authoritarian practices. While Russia and China are viewed with suspicion due to their perceived authoritarian influence, economic ties with both remain strategically important. The EU and US are seen as democracy supporters, though their credibility is undermined by perceived inconsistency and limited strategic commitment.
- In **Ukraine**, the EU, US, and UK are seen as aligned democracy supporters, particularly in areas such as anti-corruption, judicial reform, and civil society engagement. However, democracy support tends to be secondary to war-related assistance, with security and sovereignty taking precedence in public and institutional expectations.
- In **Lebanon**, external actors are widely perceived as complicit in preserving the status quo. While the US, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have supported state institutions such as the Lebanese Armed Forces, their engagement is often seen as privileging stability over reform. Iran's support for Hezbollah is viewed as reinforcing parallel governance structures and obstructing democratic accountability. The UN's technical assistance is appreciated but perceived as ineffective due to political interference and lack of enforcement capacity.
- In **Palestine**, the longstanding reality of occupation and institutional paralysis, along with the ongoing genocide in Gaza, have a considerable impact on local perceptions of external actors. The US is widely viewed as an enabler of authoritarianism, both through its support for Israel and its securitised approach to the Palestinian Authority. Iran and Qatar are seen as bolstering Hamas's control in Gaza, contributing to political division and authoritarian enabling. China's rhetorical support for Palestinian rights contrasts with its deepening cooperation with Israel, including in surveillance technologies. The UN is perceived as a humanitarian actor with limited political leverage, while the Arab League is seen as ineffective and irrelevant.
- In **Tunisia**, China and Saudi Arabia are perceived as pragmatic actors offering stability and investment, while the EU's normative stance is undermined by its own interest-driven engagement. Besides, the volatility of external support – strong during the democratic transition but predominantly muted during the authoritarian reemergence – has reinforced perceptions of opportunism and even hypocrisy. This shift has contributed to a growing legitimacy gap for the EU, particularly as its support for President Saïed's government is seen as contradicting its stated commitment to democratic principles.

Therefore, local perceptions evidence that democracy support is not judged solely on discourse or funding, but on the broader political and economic engagements that accompany it. In the

case of the EU, local perceptions are not based only on its DS but also on its policies in other realms such as energy, security, and migration. For instance, the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding and Brussels' overt support for President Saied have contributed to perceptions of EU complicity in authoritarian consolidation. Moreover, EU DS is not perceived as coherent across the neighbourhood. The most striking example is the impact of EU double standards in Ukraine and Gaza, which, along with the behaviour of certain EU member states, has damaged the EU's credibility in the Southern Neighbourhood.

Put simply, where the EU is seen as inconsistent or ineffective, alternative actors gain legitimacy. Where local actors value stability over democracy, normative appeals may fall flat. To be credible, the EU and its partners must ensure that their overall behaviour aligns with their stated commitments to democracy. More importantly, to address these gaps, the EU must integrate local perceptions into its policy design, identify areas of comparative advantage, and build coalitions that resonate with local priorities.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings above, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the EU DS in the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods:

- 1. Adopt a differentiated approach:** Move beyond regime-type classifications and assess actors based on their actual practices and impacts, ensuring that interest-driven cooperation (e.g., energy and migration deals) does not undermine democracy support objectives.
- 2. Strengthen alliances with norm-building organisations:** Deepen and better coordinate support to regional and international organisations such as the – UN, OSCE, CoE – that promote democratic standards, by addressing their internal and external limitations (internal veto, authoritarianism, token compliance, etc.). In the context of elite capture or democratic backsliding, focus on local accountability mechanisms, civic education, and media freedom.
- 3. Counter competing narratives:** Develop strategic communication tools to challenge portrayals of democracy support as foreign interference and promote narratives in line with local needs and perceptions.
- 4. Ground engagement in perceptions:** Systematically integrate local perceptions into policy design through consultations and partnerships with civil society, to understand how external actors are viewed, how the EU itself is perceived, and where the EU can offer added value.
- 5. Ensure coherence:** Align democracy support with other EU priorities (e.g. migration, security) to avoid contradictory messaging and reinforce the EU's normative credibility.

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