



Fragmented Practices, Shared Lessons: EU Democracy Support in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods

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Abstract

This policy brief provides a cross-case analysis of EU democracy support in six countries (Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia) covering 2011-2025, drawing on SHAPEDEM-EU Work Package 4 research on narratives of contestation within the EU, and on democracy support and foreign policy practices. It shows that EU democracy support is fragmented and often subordinated to security, migration and geopolitical priorities, revealing gaps between rhetorical commitments and behavioural practices. In Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia, short term stability considerations consistently outweighed empowerment, embeddedness and accountability, while in Armenia and Ukraine, alignment between local political will and EU interests enabled more democratic practices. Georgia illustrates the risks of dissonance, where rhetoric of conditionality collapses in practice.

The brief advances the SHAPEDEM-EU Democracy Learning Loop (DLL) as a tool to transform EU democracy support into a reciprocal, collective learning process, linking EU institutions, local actors and civil society to strengthen democratic knowledge and practices. Recommendations include centering local voices and priorities, simplifying access to funding, aligning democracy support with broader foreign policies, investing in civic and media education, protecting civic space and institutionalising feedback and practices of contestation. Operationalising the DLL can enable the EU to move from transactional stability management toward locally embedded, accountable democracy support, and fostering co-produced, context-sensitive democratic practices.



Introduction

Over the past decades, the European Union has placed democracy at the core of its foreign policy, reflecting its normative identity as a promoter of human rights, rule of law and good governance. However, scientific literature and policy practice increasingly show that EU democracy support has shifted over time from a primarily normative agenda to one often shaped by geopolitical considerations (Balfour 2024). Security, energy, migration and regional stability frequently took precedence over democratic principles. This evolution reflects broader tensions within the EU as a “multilevel polity” (Hooghe, Marks, and Marks 2001), where central institutions, member states, civil society and local actors interact in ways that can both enable and constrain democracy support. Discursive contestation within the EU has been particularly influential in shaping this trajectory. As SHAPEDEM-EU research on EU narratives carried out within Work Package 4 has shown, debates and contestations among EU stakeholders highlight persistent gaps between rhetorical commitments to democracy and democracy support, and their translation into policy practice. This shows the limits of the EU as a coherent and able-to-learn actor.

This policy brief advances this argument providing a cross-case analysis of EU democracy support in six countries (Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine in the Eastern Europe and Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia in the Southern Neighbourhood) covering 2011–2025. It draws on published research from SHAPEDEM-EU Work Package 4 on narratives of contestation within the EU, highlighting who shapes knowledge about democracy support, which voices are excluded and which barriers or enabling factors influence democratic learning. This policy brief also explores how democratic principles (social embeddedness, empowerment and accountability) are reflected in EU actions, both in democracy support and in connected areas such as trade, migration, energy and security (Achraimer and Pace, 2024).

In line with the SHAPEDEM-EU project, democracy and democracy support are approached here as contested practices. Democracy is seen as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organised around shared practical understandings” (Schatzki 2001) and as “an aspiration that manifests in local democratic practices, which both shape and are shaped by local democratic background knowledge” (Achraimer and Pace, forthcoming). This perspective emphasises that democracy is not just institutional but lived and learned through continuous participation, repeated engagement and the shared development of democratic knowledge among diverse actors.

A central innovation of SHAPEDEM-EU, and the focus of this brief is the Democracy Learning Loop (DLL). As Pace and Achraimer explain in Deliverable 1.4. “Working paper on democracy learning loop concept (unpublished), the DLL consists of three separate yet interrelated learning loops aimed at transforming EU democracy support from a one-way, top-down approach into a collective reciprocal learning process. Loop 1 “shows a way for the EU to improve its democracy support practices by refocusing them on local democratic knowledge and practices,” while Loop 2 “suggests joint learning of different EU actors to avoid self-sabotaging democracy support by performing contradicting practices in the fields of energy, migration, security, and trade.” Loop 3 enables local actors in both EU member states and partner countries to “learn from each other’s experiences and thereby build up democratic knowledge.” By integrating insights from WP2 and WP3 on local perceptions, WP5 on EU civil society actors, and WP6 on external non-EU



actors, this brief proposes entry points where democratic learning can be operationalised with the development of the DLL.

1 Fragmented Democratic Practices in the EU's Neighbourhoods

The relationship between the EU and its Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods has been marked by recurrent turning points, moments in which shifts in domestic political trajectories or regional crises forced the EU to affirm or adapt its position discursively and behaviourally with regard to the very principles it claims to embody. This revealed, in some instances, ambivalences of the EU as a democracy supporter. The research carried out in WP4, 'EU Democracy Support & Democratic Practices in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods,' reveals that the EU's democracy support practices cannot be reduced to a uniform model but instead oscillate between projecting norms and accommodating local or geopolitical constraints. The EU's own commitment to democraticness (defined through social embeddedness, empowerment and accountability) was repeatedly tested, often compromised, but at times recalibrated in ways that shed light on the possibilities of reflexive learning. What emerges from a cross-case analysis is a picture of fragmented democratic practices: moments of responsiveness and local embeddedness alternate with patterns of elite-centred engagement and securitisation, producing outcomes shaped both by the EU's internal tensions (as also discussed in WP5) and by the external contexts in which it operates. This dynamic can be grasped when the EU's discursive practices are considered alongside the behavioural enactments of its policies, since it is in the gap between rhetoric and action that the role of democracy in EU interventions becomes most visible.

On **Lebanon** (see Daga 2025; Mouawad et al. 2025), the EU discursive practices on democracy were consistently subordinated to stability and crisis management. Narratives emerging from Brussels and from EU Delegations often positioned Lebanon as a fragile state whose democratic potential was conditional on containing security threats and managing the refugee crisis. The "setting" was discursively constructed as one of permanent emergency, where the EU was seen as a promoter of regional stability. This framing justified behavioural practices that prioritised short-term order over long-term empowerment. Since 2017, EU financial commitments surpassing €1.2 billion were channelled primarily toward refugee assistance, border management and the strengthening of state institutions. Yet the structuring logic of these interventions was containment. The Association Agreement and European Neighbourhood Policy frameworks cast Lebanon as a partner in migration control, emphasising resilience and shared responsibility. While the EU's emphasis on supporting public services such as health and education provided a degree of embeddedness by offering relief to both host communities and refugees (primarily from Syria) amid economic crisis, this approach prioritised stability and border management without conditioning aid on non-refoulement and largely sidelined long-term measures such as legal employment pathways. In the security sector, projects such as Security Sector Reform in Lebanon and community policing initiatives sought to professionalise security forces and cultivate civic engagement. Yet these initiatives were hindered by entrenched power structures that diluted accountability, leaving local communities with little influence over reform trajectories. Even in the sphere of trade, the Barcelona Declaration's promises of regional integration produced limited gains, with exports heavily concentrated in low-value goods and few incentives for diversification.



Palestine presents an even starker contradiction between EU commitments and behavioural outcomes (see Achraimer and Pace, 2025; Ezzamouri, 2025a). From the early post-Oslo years, EU discourses were infused with the language of state-building and democratic transformation, yet the practical orientation of policy privileged the consolidation of security institutions aligned with donor priorities. In practice, EU assistance consolidated a security-first paradigm that empowered the Palestinian Authority's (PA) security apparatus while sidelining grassroots participation and wider claims for rights, justice and democracy. Behaviourally, in the West Bank, the EU invested heavily in training and professionalising the PA's security forces through initiatives like EUPOL COPPS, but these practices became accountable primarily to international donors and, indirectly, to Israeli security interests, rather than to Palestinian citizens. This left Palestinian citizens disempowered and alienated. The democraticness of EU practices in Palestine results therefore fundamentally compromised: social embeddedness is weak; social empowerment absent, as local agency is marginalised; and social accountability lacking, since feedback mechanisms from civil society are largely ignored (Ezzamouri, 2025a). The events of 7 October 2023, when Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups attacked southern Israel, killing more than 1,100 people and abducting 250, and Israel launched an unprecedented surge of violence that has killed more than 65,000 Palestinians in Gaza – described by observers and jurists as amounting to genocide (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024; UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2025) – did not produce a significant shift in this pattern within the EU. While over €1.44 billion in humanitarian aid was mobilised to the Palestinian people, the EU's reliance on the PA as a security partner persists, despite widespread Palestinian criticism of its complicity in occupation structures. The restriction of civil society organisations through donor-imposed conditionalities further narrowed the space for grassroots empowerment. As a Palestinian civil society representative noted, democracy support under conditions of occupation and colonial control becomes an oxymoron: the very framework of intervention denies sovereignty, making discursive commitments hollow (Ezzamouri, 2025a). The EU's democracy support and foreign policy practices in Palestine thus reveal a structural incapacity to embed democratic practices where the basic conditions of self-determination are absent, exposing the contradictions of external democracy support when entangled with occupation and settler colonialism.

Tunisia, by contrast, illustrates the temporal erosion of EU democracy support practices and democraticness. In the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution, the EU labelled Tunisia as a “success story” of the regional protest movements, with narratives celebrating its potential as a model of political transition and democratic transformation (see Ezzamouri, 2025b). Tunisian civil society, youth movements and reform-minded politicians were celebrated as agents of transformation. Initially, behavioural practices seemed aligned with this discourse: EU programmes such as PARMSS embedded accountability mechanisms and sought to build transparency within the Ministry of the Interior. Social empowerment was pursued through engagement with reformist actors, and social embeddedness appeared in efforts to link assistance with grassroots oversight. However, as political assassinations, terrorist attacks and migration pressures mounted, the EU's framing and practices started shifting around 2014-2015. The plotline became one of fragility and threat, with Tunisian stability tied to Europe's own security. Behaviourally, this reorientation manifested in technocratic and securitised interventions that abandoned earlier commitments to inclusive reform. By the time of President



Saied's 2021 self-coup, the EU's cautious criticism was not matched by behavioural adaptation: migration and border management took precedence, while democracy support became marginal. Here, the contestation within EU institutions over whether to continue treating Tunisia as a partner in democratic transition was resolved through the language of "pragmatism," which operationally prioritised short-term stability and interests. The result was the erosion of democratic practices: embeddedness declined as local actors were excluded and also silenced by Tunisian authoritarian practices, empowerment was blocked by entrenched elite structures and accountability was bypassed in favour of centralised cooperation.

Shifting to the Eastern Neighbourhood, [Armenia](#) followed a different trajectory, one in which commitment to democratic practices increased over time but remained uneven across policy domains (see Mikhelidze et al. 2025; Kudlenko, 2025). Discursively, the EU's position was constrained by Armenia's geopolitical dependence on Russia, particularly around the failed Association Agreement of 2013. The EU's self-conception here was ambivalent: it framed itself as a normative partner but accepted Armenia's ties with Russia as a structural limit. This discursive pragmatism translated behaviourally into elite-focused diplomacy with little local embeddedness. The signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2017 marked a shift in both discourse and practice. The EU began to adopt a narrative of Armenia as a reform partner, with civil society and watchdog groups increasingly seen as central characters in the story of reform. The Velvet Revolution of 2018 proved as a turning point: the EU discursively aligned with the revolution's democratic aspirations and behaviourally expanded its partnerships with grassroots actors, NGOs and youth groups. Social empowerment increased as EU support for NGOs and media nearly doubled, and embeddedness deepened through more participatory programming. Yet, in the security field, democratic practices lagged, as the EU justified its limited role by acknowledging Armenia's dependence on Russia and maintained a restrained approach in its security cooperation. It was only after Russia's passive stance during the last war in Nagorno-Karabakh that the EU recalibrated, launching the EU Mission in Armenia in 2023. The case of Armenia highlights that when local political will converges with EU interests, practices can take a more democratic direction, but structural dependencies may constrain the reach of empowerment and accountability in specific policy sectors.

The case of [Georgia](#) presents the dangers of EU discursive and behavioural dissonance (see Mikhelidze et al. 2025; Mikhelidze, 2025). On the one hand, EU discourse continued to emphasise democratic values and conditionality as core to the country's accession process. The "plot" of the EU's narrative described Georgia as a candidate state undergoing reform, with accession as the reward for progress. However, in practice, the EU's decision in December 2023 to grant candidate status despite clear democratic backsliding contradicted its own rhetorical commitments. This choice undermined democratic conditionality and signalled to domestic elites that authoritarian practices would not block European integration. Social accountability was eroded as Georgian citizens' protests against democratic regression were effectively ignored in rethinking EU approach to democratic support. Furthermore, EU civil society support in Georgia revealed a pattern of technocratic elitism, with funds concentrated on established NGOs disconnected from new grassroots protest movements, reproducing donor dependence rather than social empowerment. Contestation within EU institutions over conditionality was resolved through geopolitical considerations (i.e. the intention to anchor Georgia within the EU orbit amidst Russian pressure), but behaviourally this line exacerbated democratic deficits. The



protests of 2024-2025, driven by local actors mobilising across generations, represented a new democratic energy that the EU failed to engage. In response, Brussels proposed redirecting over €100 million in aid from government channels to civil society organisations, representing a case of surface learning and an effort to adapt to shifting civic realities.

The case of **Ukraine**, finally, demonstrates the possibility of alignment between discursive practices and behavioural democraticness, even within a context of ongoing open conflict with Russia (see Mikhelidze et al. 2025; Osypchuk and Suslov, 2025). Discursively, the EU framed Ukraine's 2014 Maidan Revolution as a democratic awakening aligned with European values, positioning civil society as heroic actors in a struggle for justice and transparency. Behaviourally, this translated into conditionality-based reforms tied to visa liberalisation and the Association Agreement, embedding accountability mechanisms and empowering civil society watchdogs. The decentralisation reforms were locally demanded, EU-supported and enhanced both empowerment and embeddedness. The 2022 full-scale invasion created a new change in EU-Ukraine engagement and democratic practices. Ukraine was no longer seen as merely aspiring to democracy but started to be seen as democracy under attack. This shift in discourses pushed behavioural practices that intertwined democracy support with security and military assistance. Candidate status and accession negotiations were then fast-tracked. Despite martial law, civic engagement and media oversight in Ukraine continued, with citizens ranking anti-corruption and judicial reform as top priorities. Perceptions of inadequate EU aid underscored the need for stronger feedback loops, but the dynamic between Brussels and Ukrainian society has become one of mutual dependence. Here the EU moved beyond rhetorical democracy support to recognition of Ukraine as a democracy in practice, illustrating the potential alignment of discourse and behaviour when local agency is central and mechanisms supporting reform are both credible and responsive.

Taken together, the six cases reveal that the EU cannot be seen as a consistent democracy-supporting actor, but rather as a fragmented polity whose practices vary according to context, contestation and strategic calculation. On Lebanon and Palestine, the dominance of securitisation discourses and practices erode democraticness. Tunisia illustrates the collapse of an initially promising democratic agenda under the weight of shifting priorities and local politics. Armenia demonstrates a partial expansion of democratic practices, occurring when EU expectations and strategic interests align with local dynamics, though still constrained by structural dependencies. Georgia reveals the costs of dissonance in EU democracy support, where the rhetoric of conditionality collapses in practice, while Ukraine highlights the potential for democratic practices when EU discourse, strategic calculations, local agency, and behavioural practices reinforce one another.

Across all cases, certain patterns emerge. First, the EU's discursive practices and internal narratives of contestation consistently framed democracy as an essential component of its identity, yet its behavioural practices often subordinated democratic principles to security, migration or geopolitical imperatives. This is most evident in Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia, where stability and control overshadowed empowerment and accountability. Second, when domestic mobilisations created openings, as in Armenia's Velvet Revolution and Ukraine's Euromaidan, the EU displayed greater capacity to embed democratic practices, though asymmetries persisted, particularly in the security domain. Third, the reliance on elite-level civil society engagement, evident in both Lebanon and Georgia, repeatedly constrained



embeddedness and overlooked emergent grassroots actors. Finally, the EU's readiness to compromise reforms for strategic ends, as in Georgia and Tunisia, undermined its credibility as a democracy supporter, whereas in Ukraine its consistent linkage of reforms to conditionalities reinforced both accountability and mutual trust.

2 Perceptions of EU Democracy Support in the Neighbourhoods

Local actors across the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods articulate a remarkably consistent critique of EU democracy support that both corroborates and deepens the WP4 finding of an interest-driven EU that fails to engage structural causes of democratic deficit.

Local empirical evidence from WP2 (Eastern Neighbourhood) and WP3 (Southern Neighbourhood) paints a convergent yet locally contrasting picture: across both regions, EU democracy support is widely perceived as top-down, "technical" and "activity-driven," producing mistrust, dependency and a pronounced gap between rhetoric and lived realities (Korosteleva and Kudlenko, 2025; see Deliverable D3.3, unpublished). In the East, survey and focus groups data reveal that democracy lives as much in self-organisation (e.g. volunteer mobilisations in Ukraine) as in formal institutions; citizens associate democracy with freedoms and civic power but also flag that EU programmes disproportionately target national elites and established civil society organisations and excluding less affirmed grassroots actors (Korosteleva and Kudlenko, 2025). In Georgia, sizeable shares of respondents (38%) view "European values" as a threat to tradition, highlighting that democracy support practices without local mediation, or better social embeddedness, breeds resistance and necessitates (un)learning on all sides (See Deliverable D2.5, unpublished). In the Southern Neighbourhood, qualitative interviews and focus groups show intensified resentment where EU priorities (migration, border control, securitisation) appear to sideline democratic transformation: interlocutors describe aid as engendering a "culture of dependency" and a "menu à la carte" approach that privileges EU interests over structural reforms (see Deliverable D3.3, unpublished). Palestine and Lebanon exemplify this political risk, as EU technical programming amid occupation or elite cooptation is read as complicity or performative lip service, exacerbating perceptions of incoherence and illegitimacy (see Deliverable D3.3, unpublished). Local perceptions from both the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood identify common operational obstacles in democratic practices and EU democracy support. Opaque gatekeeping by intermediaries, complex funding procedures and a bias toward well-resourced partners systematically blocks inclusive engagement and stifles feedback loops. As discussed by Fijał, Małgorzata et. al. (2025), civil society organisations within EU member states can play a critical role in counteracting these dynamics by promoting participation, monitoring and social cohesion in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood, though their dependence on external financing also raises dilemmas of autonomy. At the same time, the broader international landscape complicates EU action, as external actors such as the United States, China or Gulf states pursue strategies in the EU Neighbourhoods that blur the line between democracy support and authoritarian consolidation.

3 Putting the Democracy Learning Loop into Practice

This comparative picture has significant implications for the **SHAPEDEM-EU Democracy Learning Loop**. The EU's practices show that learning often remains partial, selective and resistant to feedback from local actors. The comparative perspective demonstrates that the



Union often perceives and reacts to democratic turning points in its Neighbourhoods in ways conditioned by its own strategic priorities, but the effectiveness and credibility of its democracy support depend on its ability to adapt to local agency and to institutionalise feedback loops. In the case studies from the Southern Neighborhood and Georgia, contestation within EU institutions failed to produce reflexive adaptation, resulting in practices that privileged stability over democraticness. Armenia and Ukraine, however, suggest that when the EU is willing to recalibrate its discursive narratives in response to local changes – as in the Velvet Revolution or Euromaidan – behavioural practices can become more democratic.

The Democracy Learning Loop, as conceptualised in SHAPEDEM-EU, requires precisely this openness to local experience and willingness to decenter European assumptions and knowledges, but the EU's record shows that such learning is uneven. The challenge for EU institutions is to institutionalise reflexivity, to ensure that contestation within Brussels and within the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood translates into practices that embed empowerment and accountability rather than suppress them. In other terms, for the EU to embody its professed values, it must cultivate the capacity for embracing pluralised and contextualised practices of democracy not as add-ons to security or other short-term priorities but as constitutive dimensions of its foreign policy. Only by doing so can the EU hope to move beyond the hierarchical dichotomy of “democratisers” and “democratisees” (Achraimer and Pace, 2024) and genuinely coproduce democratic practices with its neighbours.

Concretely, then, the promise of a Democracy Learning Loop is conditioned not only on institutional will but on concrete reforms: simplifying access, rebalancing funding to community actors, investing in civic and media education, and treating contestation as actionable input rather than external critique (Korosteleva and Kudlenko, 2025; see Deliverable D3.3, unpublished). Only by addressing these empirical fault-lines can EU practice move from transactional stability management toward locally embedded, accountable democracy support. In this light, the EU should:

- 1. Put local voices, priorities and conceptions of democracy at the centre.** As discussed, EU democracy support has too often flowed through national elites or established NGOs, leaving out the grassroots actors where much of democratic life actually happens. The EU should create safe, open and periodic spaces where it can systematically listen to the local experiences, and adapt programmes accordingly to make support more relevant, less elitist and closer to everyday democratic practices.
- 2. Break down barriers to funding and support.** Many local stakeholders from the Neighbourhoods struggle to access EU support because procedures are too complex and tailored to big and more structured organisations. This fuels dependency and reinforces gatekeeping by well-connected intermediaries. To counter this, the EU should design more flexible forms of support that small organisations can actually use, whether through micro-grants, rapid-response aid, or multi-year core funding that allows organisations to plan ahead their work. Making funding accessible to a wider range of civil society actors in the neighbourhoods will broaden ownership of democracy support and reduce the perception that it serves only a select few.

3. **Align democracy support with all EU foreign policies.** The EU's credibility suffers when democracy promotion is undermined by competing priorities, such as migration control in Lebanon and Tunisia, or geopolitical considerations in Armenia and Georgia. To change this, democracy should not be treated as a separate policy area but as a guiding principle across foreign policies. This means ensuring that initiatives in these areas do not contradict democratic goals or even do not hinder the enjoyment of rights. In addition to its local benefits, a clearer alignment would eventually strengthen the EU's image as a consistent and trustworthy actor.
4. **Invest in learning and resilience through education.** Sustainable democracy requires more than institutions; it needs citizens who are equipped to participate and resist domestic or external authoritarian pressures. Civic education, media literacy and support for independent media are crucial here. In places like Georgia, where European values are sometimes seen as a threat to tradition – also partly due to disinformation spread by external actors –, joint learning initiatives can foster dialogue and mutual understanding. Supporting both formal and informal education will help cultivate the skills, values and resilience that democratic practice relies on (Korosteleva and Kudlenko, 2025).
5. **Protect civic space and support civil society under pressure.** Given trends of democratic backsliding in the Neighbourhoods, EU Delegations should systematically monitor restrictions on CSOs and grassroots activists, ensuring that EU aid is explicitly linked to the protection of civic space. The EU should also fund legal defence mechanisms and provide targeted support to civil society actors facing repression or harassment. At the same time, care must be taken to avoid prescriptive measures that could limit the autonomy or operational space of local CSOs, as observed in Palestine, ensuring that support strengthens rather than constrains local democratic agency.
6. **Make feedback and contestation part of the process.** Criticism, protest and disagreement are signs of democratic vitality, not threats to stability. Yet too often the EU treats contestation as noise to be managed rather than insights or claims to be acted on. Embedding regular feedback mechanisms (e.g. with a dedicated coordinating democracy learning unit), responding publicly to civic concerns, and being willing to adapt policies would turn critique into a source of democratic development. By normalising reflexivity and showing that learning is mutual, the EU can model the very democratic practices it seeks to support.

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