



Supporters and contesters of democracy in EUMS

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Authors: Joanna Dyduch, Magdalena Góra, Volodymyr Posviatenko, Marcin Zubek

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) has become one of the few actors in global affairs in the middle of the third decade of the 21st century, which continues to keep democracy support high on its agenda. In response to the growing geopolitical tensions in its neighbourhoods, however, the EU and its member states are revising the strategy of democracy support. In this working paper, we use contestation lenses and capture the EU's changing role by analysing its criticism. By examining the contestation patterns of existing discourses and practices of democracy promotion in the EU member states (EUMS), this paper explores the role of contestation in shaping the EU's engagement in democracy support (DS), with particular attention to how contestation manifests across different levels of EU norms and governance practices. Empirically, we mapped criticism as seen from the level of member states towards democracy support. We rely on thoroughly gathered and analysed data in the 2014–2022 period from seven EUMS – Austria, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden – within the SHAPEDEM-EU project. The documents on DS in the selected EUMS gathered in the 2011–2022 period were updated to include reactions until 2024 to developments in the EU neighbourhood following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the prolonged Israeli war in Gaza following the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023.

The key findings demonstrate that the fundamental norm of liberal democracy is essentially uncontested by actors in EUMS. However, certain constitutive elements of the norm are subject to occasional contestation, mainly by some think tanks and parliamentary actors and through the repositioning of the DS as a secondary value to security. This suggests that there is a shift toward a more pragmatic approach; however, discursively, Normative Power Europe is still the dominant approach in the analysed material. Regarding the DS for both neighbourhoods, our analysis demonstrates that the logic of democracy promotion and support in the two EU neighbourhoods differs, with diverse patterns of contestation. It results in and reflects two distinct types of actor identities: normative- and pragmatic-focused. Both EU neighbourhoods are becoming spaces where geopolitical considerations weigh more, specifically because in both there are an increased security deterioration and destabilisation caused by the Russian aggression on Ukraine in the East and the Israeli prolonged war in Gaza. As a result, these have become increasingly less normative spaces.

1 Introduction

The EU has become one of the few actors in global affairs in the middle of the third decade of the 21st century which continues to keep democracy support (DS) high on its agenda (Klass, 2025). In the context of the increasingly unstable and hostile international environment, the destroyed foundations of the security architecture of the European continent by Russian aggression (including full-scale war against Ukraine) and the departure of the US as a key security actor in European affairs, the EU is at a crossroads.

The EU is famously perceived as an actor that has developed instruments for reacting “in good weather conditions” (Blockmans, 2017). For a long time, this meant that the key instruments were designed to stabilise the neighbourhood and promote democracy as imprinted in civilian (Duchêne, 1973), normative (Manners, 2002; Sjursen, 2006), liberal (Wagner, 2017), and many more conceptualisations (Góra, 2023) of power Europe. It might also be the case that the EU has been a rather naive power. As every student of European integration knows, the EU's ability to act in external relations is significantly impacted by the will and actions of its member states (EUMS). Specifically, in relations with its neighbours, the role of national preferences and diplomatic actions is crucial. At the end of the day,

these were the key actors in the Minsk format reacting to the aftermath of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the illegal annexation of Crimea (Cross & Karolewski, 2017; Izotov, 2019; Liik, 2022; Noutcheva, 2018; Siddi, 2016). The EUMS led EU actions towards the Southern Neighbourhood following the 2011 Arab Spring (Amadio Viceré, 2021; Koenig, 2016), and are also key actors in efforts to promote democracy (Dyduch et al., 2024). Despite concerted efforts, it is often the case that the EUMS contest the key lines of EU engagement and, in some cases, de-Europeanise (Dyduch & Müller, 2021; Juncos & Pomorska, 2021; Müller et al., 2021).

Against this background, the main aim of this article is to analyse how, in response to the changing international context, the EU and its member states perceive and shift their role in democracy support and how that impacts and shapes the complex EU global identity. Thus, the paper centres on the question of the nature and character of EU actorness, approached from normative, conceptual, and pragmatic-operational perspectives. It enquires whether the EU is evolving into a *sui generis* post-pragmatic normative actor type.

2 Description of activities

In order to do so, we decided to use lenses of contestation and capture the changing EU role by analysing its criticism. By examining the contestation patterns of existing discourses and practices of democracy promotion in the EUMS, this paper explores the role of contestation in shaping the EU's engagement in democracy support, with a particular focus on how contestation manifests across different levels of EU norms and governance practices.

Empirically, we mapped criticism as seen from the level of member states towards democracy support. EU democracy support is a form of practice performed within a multi-layered constellation of communities of practice (Achraimer & Pace, 2025). Specifically in the EU, DS is provided in the concerted actions of EU institutions and by the EUMS, creating a truly multi-level system where these communities of practice are differently structured at the EU and EUMS levels. Following Achraimer and Pace (2025), we distinguish three groupings that comprise the top layer of the constellation: communities of EU DS practices, communities of local democratisation practices, and communities of other EU foreign affairs practices (see more: Achraimer, Pace 2024). This is why we are primarily analysing the selected EUMS perspective, allowing us to fill in the gap in knowledge on EU democracy support policies and eventually its stance.

Methodologically, we rely on thoroughly gathered and analysed data from seven EUMS in the 2014–2022 period: Austria, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden¹. France was not included in the analysis, as it represents a particularly specific and complex case. Its position within the EU as both a founding member and a key political, economic, and military power within the community, its global ambitions as both a regional and at times global power, as well as its historically and geopolitically conditioned engagement in the MENA region, would require a separate and more detailed examination beyond the scope of this report. At the same time, the report references to France's policy and position on the issues discussed, acknowledging its relevance while not analysing it in detail. The analysis comprised two stages. Firstly, the main documents produced by the various actors engaged in democracy support were gathered and described with the key descriptive and analytical variables. This formed a dataset of 902 documents on DS in selected EUMS in the 2011–2022

¹ For a full description of the methodological approach, see Dudych, J., Góra, M., Grzymiski, J., and Zielińska, K. (eds.). (2024). *Democracy Support in the EU's Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood by selected EU Member States (2011-2022)*. Report, SHAPEDEM-EU – Rethinking and Reshaping the EU's Democracy Support in its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood.

period. The analysed actors include national governments, national political parties and their leaders, national parliaments, regional and local governments, national think tanks and experts, civil society actors, and interest groups. Such a broad selection of actors of DS enabled us to analyse those who act in different capacities, are differently situated in the political structure, and vary in the power to influence the state's policies or broader public discourses. Secondly, the documents that were preselected for further analysis were manually coded using MAXQDA in order to capture the various aspects of contestation of DS. For the analysis, we selected all coded fragments that referred to contestation, forming a set of 362 documents (see Table 1 in the Appendix with the documents that were quoted in this Working Paper). The recent developments in the EU neighbourhood, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the prolonged Israeli war in Gaza following the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023, made it necessary to update the perspective to capture the EUMS' reactions following the events of 2022 and 2023. Hence, the data was complemented with additional analysis of the 2022–2024 period that focuses on specific developments in conflicts developing in the Eastern Neighbourhood – namely the Russian war of aggression, and in the Southern Neighbourhood by focusing on Israel's destructive military campaign in Gaza.

Theoretically, we aim to advance our understanding of EU democracy support and its reconceptualisation after a more pragmatic perspective dominated the Western responses to the turmoil in the world. For this, we decided to use the role theory perspective and see if the contestation of DS in EUMS can tell us how the EU meta-roles in the international arena are changing.

The paper develops as follows. Firstly, we present an overview of the EU's democracy support from the perspective of the member states toward various categories of countries in the EU neighbourhood. This is followed by the theoretical section, discussing role theory adapted to the EU's meta roles. This is followed by the presentation of patterns of contestation toward the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods.

3 The EU's democracy support and unrest in its neighbourhood

Since the end of the Cold War, the EU has conceptualised its engagement with neighbours within a paradigm aiming at supporting transformations toward liberal democracies and market economies (Noutcheva et al., 2013). This paradigm, successful in some policy formats such as the EU's Eastern enlargement, failed in other cases, most notably regarding relations with Russia. Hence, scholars developed a model of relations with the EU's neighbours and neighbours' neighbours that, to various degrees, relied on the promotion of the trio of democratisation, prosperity and security/stability (Fossum et al., 2020; Gstöhl, 2023; Gstöhl & Lannon, 2015; Gstöhl & Schunz, 2016). Besides relations with EEA countries, the remaining regional countries belong to three categories. Firstly, candidate countries, for which the EU engagement in DS is most elaborated and (partially) secured by the conditionality policy (Grimm, 2019). Turkey occupies a special category in this group; while officially a candidate country, the process is stalled. Ukraine and Moldova – the most recent candidates – are transitioning from the ENP to candidate formats in the context of the Russian direct and indirect aggression against them. Secondly, ENP partner countries, where DS has been a priority, often compete with security and development aims (Buşcaneanu, 2014; Kochenov & Basheska, 2016; Theuns, 2017). Most of the Southern neighbours belong to this group, as well as the South Caucasus countries. Finally, there is a group of pariah countries that are excluded or suspended from the ENP format, such as Russia, Belarus, and Syria (until 2024). For these actors, DS is primarily limited to specific activities directed toward civil society, but due to the authoritarian nature of the regimes, it is very limited.

There is a set of internal and external challenges to the EU DS agenda. Focusing on the period after 2014, the growing significance of populist right-wing parties in EU politics, at both member-state and EU levels, puts liberal democracy at the crossroads. In some countries, governmental actors have openly contested liberal democracy as the foundation of their political systems (most notably in Hungary). This, however, initially did not translate into open contestation of DS (Buzogány et al., 2021), but gradually translated into increased internal contestation of EU foreign policy (Juncos & Pomorska, 2021) up to the point of an official departure from EU standards (especially in the case of Hungary and Slovakia from 2025). However, there is also a less clear departure from the principles of DS through changes to the hierarchy of key fundamental norms. This characterises, for instance, such countries as Italy under Meloni's government (Citino, 2025).

Externally, the key challenges for the EU were linked with the more aggressive behaviour of its adversaries, particularly Russia, culminating in 2022 in the full-scale war against Ukraine. Since the colour revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Ukrainian Maidan revolution, the main aim of Russian foreign policy has been to counteract democratic tendencies in the region. For some scholars, this was a follow-up to the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, when Tunisia, Egypt, and almost all other countries of North Africa and the Mediterranean Middle East witnessed some form of democratic uprisings (Bengtson et. al 2011). Beyond Russia, however, China's growing influence and, more recently, even shifts in U.S. foreign policy have posed additional challenges to the EU's democracy support agenda. A central objective of this study is to map and characterise the forms of contestation of democracy support within the EU, with special attention to the member states. Particular attention is paid to potential regional differentiation in contestation, specifically how they shift the perspective on developments in the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods.

4 Theoretical framework and internal vertical contestation

Drawing from empirical evidence at the level of EU member states (EUMS), the analysis seeks to identify emerging patterns and transformations in the EU's normative identity and related democracy promotion toolbox. In doing so, it interrogates how external geopolitical shifts and internal normative tensions are reshaping the EU's approach to external DS engagement.

We rely on role theory, specifically on role contestation within a political system that impacts the way external actions and foreign policy roles are conceptualised, performed, and, in reaction to contestation, reconceptualised. We start by introducing the contestation lens. Antje Wiener states that contestation's "analytical utility lies in understanding the distinct meanings of contestation as both a social practice of merely objecting to norms (principles, rules, or values) by rejecting them or refusing to implement them, and as a mode of critique through critical engagement in a discourse about them" (Wiener, 2017, p. 1). This kind of understanding highlights the normative importance of contestation within political systems and its potential impact on an actor's actions. In our study, we identify contestation of DS at the three levels following Antje Wiener's proposal (2014). At the foundational level, contestation emerges from tensions between the EU's normative commitment to democracy promotion and the increasing prioritisation of security, sovereignty, and stability. This level captures the core conflict between normative and geopolitical norms in the EU's external action understood as priorities for the actions. It is specifically significant since, at this level, the conflicts with such relevant fundamental norms as security can occur. The level of organising principles explores how the EU's democracy support mechanisms may inadvertently bolster autocratic regimes. Case studies from Serbia and Georgia illustrate how authoritarian leaders have strategically utilised EU democracy promotion instruments – particularly funding mechanisms – to consolidate illiberal governance

practices. This raises critical questions regarding the adaptability and unintended consequences of EU democracy support instruments: are these mechanisms evolving, and if so, how and in response to what types of contestation? At the level of standardised procedures, we examine how procedural instruments – such as funding conditionalities, monitoring practices, and partnerships – are being contested and possibly restructured in response to normative and geopolitical shifts within the EU and its neighbourhood (Buzogány et al., 2021; Poppe & Wolff, 2017).

By analysing member state perceptions and actions, we gain insight into how national-level contestation enables or constrains EU roles, and how these perceptions inform the ongoing recalibration of the EU's external identity and normative aspirations. Researchers have noted that looking at domestic (internal) contestations can be very productive in understanding and analysing the actors' roles (Kaarbo & Cantir, 2017). This was also successfully applied to understanding the EU performance (Koenig, 2016; Niemann & Hoffmann, 2019). Within DS, however, the interplay between the EU and EUMS levels is rather understudied. As Niemann and Hoffmann claim: "Although this contestation may be reinforced through (and originate in) the other types of contestation, research on the EU as an international actor rarely digs deep enough to investigate (horizontal and/or vertical) contestation within the Member States" (Niemann & Hoffmann, 2019, p. 39). It appears that more turbulent international relations and, in response, a more geopolitical EU foreign policy are causing increased domestic contestation.

In this article we use the model proposed by Niemann and Hoffmann (2019), proposing specific levels of contestation: "(A) horizontal contestation over the EU's role among different national elites at the EU level; (B) horizontal contestation over the EU's role between domestic elites within the EUMS; (C) horizontal contestation over the national role in EU contexts between national elites in the EUMS; and (D) vertical contestation over the national role in EU contexts between national elites and the public within the EUMS (Koenig 2016: 160)" (Niemann & Hoffmann, 2019, pp. 38). Because the EU is a special construction there is more dimensions to add: "(E) horizontal contestation over the EU's role between the elites of the EU (and its member states) and those in the neighbourhood countries. (...) horizontal contestation between the elites of the EU (and its supranational institutions) on the one hand, and member states' elites on the other (F)" (Niemann & Hoffmann, 2019, pp. 39). In this paper, we specifically focus on two types of contestation: Type D, which examines the EUMS and seeks to understand the patterns of contestation within it, and Type F, which investigates the contesting actions between the EU and its institutions, as well as elites in EUMS.

We expect to demonstrate what the pattern of contestation – particularly as expressed by the EUMS – reveals about the transformation of democracy support strategies and tools. Specifically, answering the following two questions:

- How does contestation contribute to the reconstruction of the EU's democracy support toolbox, particularly at the organisational and procedural levels?
- In what ways does internal contestation affect the EU's normative identity, and how does this in turn shape the EU's external actorship?

Evidence suggests that geopolitical considerations are increasingly shaping member states' approach to democracy support, reflecting a broader redefinition of the EU's external roles (Dyduch et al., 2024). Thus, contestation at the EUMS level is not merely reactive, but constructive in reshaping EU norms, potentially shifting the balance between the EU as a normative power and as a geopolitical actor.

We assume that new types of EU roles are emerging in the context of DS. These are the emanations of the EU meta-roles executed in the international arena (Aggestam, 2006; Bengtson & Elgström, 2011). We propose a typology to conceptualise the shifting roles of the EU in its democracy promotion efforts, utilising the roles that are embedded in the EU's overall stance. The dominant role is Normative Power Europe (NPE), rooted in principled promotion of democratic norms. This role would be defined here as a conceptual framework that positions the EU as a transformative actor in international relations, exercising influence through the principled promotion of liberal-democratic norms rather than through traditional military or economic coercion, rejecting conventional power politics (Manners 2002, 2008). As Whitman (2011) explains, NPE "works through ideas, opinions and conscience" rather than through military force or purely economic leverage and seeks to actively transform neighbouring countries and regions by promoting liberal-democratic values, participatory social practices, and human rights. The framework emphasises strengthening both international and cosmopolitan law, prioritising "the rights of individuals and not only the rights of states to sovereign equality" (Sjursen 2006), which reflects a commitment to universal human rights over traditional state sovereignty. Yet the effective normative power required the EU to maintain internal legitimacy and external credibility. This approach, while gradually evolving since the 1970s through political integration, has become a framework central to EU foreign policy, with a formal commitment to advancing democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms (Dyduch, Zielińska 2024: 84). However, despite the multidimensional criticism of NPE, the main problem in connection with DS is that the EU's approach was less effective specifically when facing the counteractions of its adversaries. There was also growing domestic pressure to pursue a more pragmatic foreign policy (Wunsch & Olszewska, 2022). Therefore, a new role is emerging that can be labelled post-normative/principal pragmatism. This is a more flexible, interest-driven approach, balancing values and strategic interests (Bremberg, 2020; Colombo, 2022; Winn & Gänzle, 2023). For democratic support, this approach assumes that there shall be a calculation between pragmatic goals and democratisation. As Bremberg states: "The tension between short-term goals of seeking 'practical cooperation' with authoritarian regimes, and longer-term goals of promoting democracy has been a more or less constant feature of the EU's relations with the Southern Mediterranean" (Bremberg, 2020, p. 370).

Another perspective stresses that the geopolitical tensions and adversarial policy of other powers, such as Russia and China, are forcing the EU to take a more geopolitical stance. Geopolitical Europe is based on a conceptualisation of the EU roles where democracy promotion is subordinated to strategic and security priorities. It is a pragmatic, realist-like approach prioritising strategic interests and power competition over norm promotion, reflecting adaptation to a more hostile and multipolar international environment. Geopolitical Europe is increasingly mindful of the uncertainty regarding the future of regional and global international relations dynamics. The 2015 ENP review and 2016 Global Strategy introduced "principled pragmatism" in foreign policy, shifting from transforming neighbouring countries to the EU's image to acting as a power broker focused on strengthening third countries' resilience (Blockmans, 2020). Finally, the geopolitically defined EU roles are informed by increasing awareness of the "limitations on the projection of liberal democracy values in cultural environments that reject them, leading to a more realistic assessment of the EU's transformative capacity" (Dyduch, Zielińska 2024: 84). In relation to the Mediterranean region, this shift is clearly exemplified by the lowering of democracy-promotion aspirations and an increasing focus on managing migration (Bourekba and Pérez 2023) as well as prioritising immediate security and stability concerns over long-term democratic transformation (Dimitriadi 2022). There is also a criticism that the EU has become a

“naive power”, where the bloc’s sometimes uncritical engagement makes it vulnerable to instrumentalisation by autocratic regimes.

5 Contesting the core of EU democracy support in EUMS

Our empirical analysis demonstrates that support for democracy as a fundamental norm has been contested within the selected member states to a limited degree. We were unable to identify claims explicitly and openly stating that liberal democracy is fundamentally problematic and therefore does not deserve states’ support. Even the leaders of the governments engaged in democratic backsliding and illiberal activities (in our sample, Poland under PiS (2015–2023) and Italy (2021–) were not questioning liberal democracy per se yet pointed to certain costs (e.g. weakened security) connected to its support. A good illustration is a quote from a Polish governmental document: “Poland is aware that supporting democracy has its price. Even the price it is paying today, when our border guard, police and army are guarding the eastern border of the European Union from the revenge of a dictator, from tyranny and contempt for humanity” (Prezydent Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2021).

However, a situation in which the governments or the EU sponsor activities aimed at democracy support, but in fact those activities contribute to the strengthening of other fundamental norms (such as security or economic prosperity), is contested much more vocally. We conclude that the arguments voiced by the contesters refer more to an illicit (improper) hierarchy of fundamental norms rather than questioning the norm of DS as a whole. In such a case, the contestation follows two strands: (A) the hierarchy is flawed, because a democratic norm should be put on top of the others; and (B) the hierarchy is flawed, because the democratic norm should be a subordinate one.

The former strand is much more common and is illustrated by this quote from a Spanish think-tank document: “It is high time for the EU and its member states to publicly recognise that its policies towards the Mediterranean have been driven by short-term security interests and status quo maintenance at the expense of democracy and human rights. The EU needs to make sure that it avoids the same mistakes in the Eastern Neighbourhood” (CIDOB, 2011). This example, however, cannot be considered contestation of a fundamental democratic norm. On the contrary, the arguments here refer to insufficient or failed support for democracy in the neighbourhood countries.

The second strand is more interesting from the point of view of fundamental norm contestation, and hence, the EU’s efforts in DS and can be further subdivided. On the one hand, there are arguments which state that the democratic norm is less important than others, as it cannot be upheld in the target countries if additional fundamental principles, such as economic (or in fact human) security, are scarce. As one Swedish parliamentarian put it, “We want to re-prioritise and spend less money on democracy assistance to institutions. We would rather invest in water and sanitation” (Sveriges riksdag, 2015).

On the other hand, this line of argument is also turned internally, where support for democracy is juxtaposed with supporting a value of assuring prosperity or security at home, as the two following quotations indicate: “‘Germany first’ is particularly valid in today’s difficult economic times and that we must think of our own people first” (Stefan Brandtner, 2020). In the Danish context, possible threats were raised in the context of DS: “These recent changes in dynamics make it even more important to focus on and counter the factors that provide breeding grounds for new terrorists or networks and to bolster relevant institutions in our partner countries” (DIIS, 2012). The EU dimension is also present in this line of contestation. The most vivid example pertains to the norm of (European) solidarity and is connected with the issue of migration. As an Italian think tank puts it, “the migration issue has exposed a fundamental contrast, that between a solidaristic and a nationalistic vision, which has led to a break-

up of the European community” (Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2015). To be fair, the above quotation indicates rather displeasure with the fact that right-wing populists contest democratic norms (in this case, human rights) and thus contribute to the deepening of divisions between Europeans. The majority of the contesters who subscribe to this internal (be it intra-state or intra-EU) basis for contestation are either political parties or civil society organisations and think tanks.

As stated above, the fundamental norm of liberal democracy is essentially not contested. However, certain constitutive elements of the norm are subject to occasional contestation, mainly by some think tanks and parliamentary actors. The most vivid examples include the Polish far-right think tank *Ordo Iuris*, which questions the support for fundamental rights of sexual minorities and women’s reproductive rights in Polish development policy. In the same vein, in one of its manifestos, the ruling Law and Justice party rejects similar “*cultural experiments*” and also points to weakened security as a result of accepting migrants into the country. The German AfD explicitly calls for a “**fundamental** [own emphasis] change of strategy in development policy, which also takes account of German security and economic interests” (Alternative für Deutschland, 2021). These anti-democratic stances are voiced by those actors for the purposes of domestic politics and are then extended to their attitude towards foreign policy in the EU neighbourhood. This is not to say that the contestation of democracy and its fundamentals only comes from right-wing parties. The chairman of the German socialist party stated in 2018 that “Ukraine’s foreign policy is now a threat to peace and the well-being of the European peoples” (Malte Daniljuk, 2018). This can be interpreted as claiming that Ukraine’s democratisation efforts (which anger Russia) run contrary to other fundamental values – security and economic prosperity.

The contestation of democracy as a fundamental norm seems to manifest itself in connection with certain phenomena. It is much more visible since 2015, when it became clear that democratic transitions in the Southern Neighbourhood are not forthcoming, and when migratory pressures entered the realm of security policy. On the contrary, a twist towards authoritarianism has become prevalent. However, this shift is difficult to grasp in the coded material, as emphasising security or economic prosperity does not necessarily have to be interpreted as undermining the fundamental norm of democracy. Another factor influencing the contestation of democracy as a fundamental norm also has to do with domestic political changes in the EU member states. Illiberal forces in power and rising far-right parties undoubtedly influence the way in which the EU’s and EUMS’ democracy support is assessed and contested.

6 Contesting DS in the EU’s Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood

Our analysis demonstrates that the logic of democracy promotion and support in the two EU neighbourhoods is different, with diverse patterns of contestation. It results in and reflects two distinct types of actor identities. Both EU neighbourhoods are becoming increasingly geopolitical arenas, marked by growing security deterioration and destabilisation. Specifically, because in both there are increased security deterioration and destabilisation caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine in the East and the prolonged Israeli war in Gaza. As a result, these have become increasingly less normative spaces; however, the EU’s approach to each neighbourhood is different.

6.1 Democracy support in the Eastern Neighbourhood before 2022

The EU’s democracy support in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries has been a subject of internal contestation among the EUMS selected for a case study. The patterns of contestation identified in the study reflected divergent approaches to the EU’s role in the neighbourhood, as well as geopolitical and

strategic factors shaping the intensity of contestation. The lack of coherence in the EaP policy was widely criticised, including calls for strategic clarity and demands for a balanced ENP for both Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods. Moreover, selecting recipients of democracy support remained a divisive issue, as many EUMS actors argued that democratic conditionality could be undermined by potentially strengthening autocratic actors in partner countries, unless proper evaluation criteria were adopted.

Poland has consistently defined EU enlargement as a means to stabilise and democratise the Eastern Neighbourhood. In its 2012 foreign policy priorities, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) defined enlargement as an instrument for democratisation (*Priorytety Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej 2012–2016*). While emphasising the continuous principle of conditionality and the aspiring members' obligation to fulfil the accession criteria, Poland advocated for extending the EU enlargement policy to the EaP countries, including Belarus, conditional on its return to the path of democratisation. Poland also stressed that the EU's policy towards the Mediterranean should not be developed at the expense of cooperation with Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. The EaP instruments, such as the visa-free regime, were described as effective tools for strengthening civil society in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Therefore, Poland's stance on the EU's democracy support in the Eastern Neighbourhood primarily followed the post-normative pragmatic approach, balancing values and strategic considerations. In this context, the EU enlargement policy was seen both as a tool to enhance security and as the real driver of democratic transformation in the EaP countries.

Nevertheless, while Poland's support for the EaP has been framed within the context of both normative and security-driven concerns, the latter dominated. The political, economic, and social modernisation of Poland's neighbours through closer ties to the EU was defined as a fundamental issue for Polish security (*Priorytety Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej 2012–2016*). In the updated 2017 foreign policy strategy, the Polish MFA maintained that the strategic goal of cooperation and assistance for EaP countries was to enhance their socio-political stability, thereby improving Poland's security (*Strategia Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej 2017–2021*). The strategy reiterated that the Eastern Neighbourhood was a matter of fundamental importance for Poland and called for the formulation of an ambitious cooperation offer within the updated EaP, which would support partners in bolstering their resilience to internal and external challenges.

The two leading Polish mainstream political parties, Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS), pledged their support for EU enlargement as the most appropriate tool for the democratisation of the Eastern Neighbourhood. PO argued for deeper EU engagement in democracy support in the EaP through strengthening ties and gradual integration of neighbouring countries into the EU. PiS contested the EU's approach, criticising the EaP for a lack of a specified final goal and the insufficiency of its instruments without the accession perspective.

However, Polish democracy support practices faced internal contestation from civil society organisations (CSOs), represented by the umbrella organisation Grupa Zagranica. In its evaluation reports, Grupa Zagranica argued that Poland's development aid allocation to the EaP was insufficient. It called for more effective and sustainable support mechanisms, which reflect the actual needs of these countries and go beyond symbolic gestures. Additionally, evaluation mechanisms for development aid activities were also contested, particularly regarding media initiatives for Belarus. In addition to this, growing pressure from Polish CSOs was observed for more robust EU support for civil society in EaP countries through instruments like the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) (Grupa Zagranica, 2012). Grupa Zagranica contended that the EED should play a greater role in

supporting democratic processes in the EaP countries and prove its added value compared to existing EU mechanisms, such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). The key recommendations included (1) providing rapid, flexible funding for democratic initiatives that did not yet meet the criteria for broader EU programmes, and (2) supporting democratic ownership in local contexts by adapting to the needs of CSOs and political groups in the EaP countries.

In Germany, the EaP faced more pronounced contestation. Die Linke, a left-wing political party, was particularly active in contestation of the EaP. Political actors from the party and its Rosa Luxemburg Foundation framed the EaP as an imperial redefinition of the EU's policy approach to its neighbours (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, 2015). Representatives of the party and the foundation emphasised claims that through its democracy support, the EU was purportedly attempting to advance its economic and security agenda. They argued that the EaP policy served neoliberal market interests rather than genuine democratic development and exacerbated rather than resolved political tensions. Overall, criticism of capitalism and neoliberal economy was a dominant pattern in Die Linke's contestation of democracy support.

Curiously, to contest the alleged geopolitical nature of the EU's democracy support, Die Linke itself frequently employed security and stability arguments. For example, support for Ukraine was viewed unfavourably and perceived as a security risk by potentially damaging relations with Russia. The EaP was framed as a policy designed to exclude Russia from cooperation with the EU and pit the EaP countries against Russia, thereby increasing instability (Andrej Hunko, 2019). In their view, Russia was a necessary actor in regional integration and a solution to security issues, rather than their source. Die Linke insisted that because of the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, the EaP was designed to detach the reestablished independent Eastern European countries from the Russian sphere of influence and to bind them politically and economically to the EU through association and free trade agreements (Die Linke, 2022).

Conversely, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung criticised the EaP for its incoherence, warning that unfulfilled expectations and ambiguous EU commitments could lead to disappointment from local actors (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015). They called for a more tailored and defined strategy. Regarding Russia and the relations between individual EaP states and Russia, they advocated for greater differentiation in the EU's approach, adapting it to the specific context of each country. Meanwhile, the Free Democrats (FDP) advocated for stricter conditionality in financial and trade assistance, emphasising that access to EU markets should be contingent on concrete democratic reforms (Freie Demokraten, 2019).

German democracy support policies have also been contested from the perspective of German CSOs. This criticism was particularly strong from the Association of German Development and Humanitarian Aid Non-Governmental Organisations (VENRO). In particular, the government was criticised for its limited inclusion of civil society actors in the formulation of democracy support strategies and the development of projects (VENRO, 2013a). VENRO also argued that the government's economic and security interests negatively impacted civil society's participation and scope for action (VENRO, 2023). Development funds, it insisted, must not be used to finance the interests of the German economy (VENRO, 2013a). In this context, German governments also faced contestation of their engagement with authoritarian regimes, with the alleged prioritisation of economic interests over genuine democracy support and the protection of human rights seen as enabling autocratic leaders. The EU has likewise been perceived as bearing responsibility for the shortcomings of democracy support in the Eastern Neighbourhood, particularly given that the stability of the EaP states has only deteriorated

over time. VENRO pointed out that the EU's economic interests have at times taken precedence over its commitment to democracy support (VENRO, 2013b). Therefore, contestation by German civil society actors evokes the notion of the EU as a "naive power".

Swedish actors were vocal in their support for democracy promotion in the Eastern Neighbourhood. For instance, in line with its traditional stance of a champion of democracy support, the Swedish MFA emphasised that DS must be embedded within the ENP framework. Swedish actors commonly reflected the position that democracy assistance to the EaP states should be conditional on adherence to the rule of law. Most Swedish actors reflected the idea that the purpose of democracy support in the Eastern Neighbourhood should lie in strengthening democratic norms, therefore, affirming the EU's role as a normative power.

However, support for democracy has not been a frequent topic of political debate in Sweden, and as a result, the intensity of contestation has remained relatively low. When contestation did occur, it mainly originated from left-wing and far-right parties. Both ends of the political spectrum contested the effectiveness of democracy support and its implementation of democracy support, albeit from opposing perspectives. While the left advocated for an increase in the scale of development assistance, the far right criticised the lack of results, arguing that allocation of funds for democracy support was futile.

Swedish CSOs, particularly Östgruppen, criticised Swedish aid to Belarus, arguing that funding had been misallocated to state institutions and local actors with ties to the government that were complicit in human rights violations. This contestation reflected broader concerns about the effectiveness of democracy support when engaging with authoritarian state actors. The Liberals party and the Green Party raised concerns regarding the scale of democracy support funding, advocating for its increase. Some degree of contestation also emerged from the liberal conservative Moderate Party, which expressed criticism – both in social media and parliamentary debates on development cooperation – towards the gender-based budgeting project implemented in Ukraine in 2013–2020. The party characterised this initiative as a misuse of taxpayers' money, which was allegedly wasted on "feminist snow removal" in Ukraine.

Conversely, the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna – SD) party fundamentally contested democracy support. In general, SD have questioned whether the investment in democracy support can meaningfully contribute to democratisation. The party's representatives argued that substantial democracy support funding had not led to significant democratic progress in EaP countries. SD have called for a reallocation of democracy support funds towards domestic needs and humanitarian aid.

In Denmark, the financial instruments of democracy support were the most frequently contested, followed by economic and political instruments (European Commission, 2011). Danish political and civil society actors have contested the effectiveness of the EU's democracy support, emphasising that economic incentives and market access are tools for promoting democratic transformation. The Danish approach generally favoured a coherent EaP strategy, with particular emphasis on strengthening institutional frameworks to align partner countries with the EU market, while reinforcing the need for consistent accountability mechanisms.

The Danish case made the tension between democracy support and other fundamental norms – such as stability – especially evident. Policy domains such as energy, migration, security, and trade had a significant influence on Denmark's democracy support practices. Danish policymakers have often

prioritised the implementation of democracy support primarily in contexts where it was perceived to enhance Danish security and stability. This increasing intertwining between development cooperation and domestic interests has been met with criticism, particularly from civil society actors. Among the few political forces that contested democracy support itself was the right-wing populist Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti – DF). DF has consistently called for a reduction in Danish development aid, arguing instead for a reallocation of funds towards domestic priorities.

In Spain, democracy support as a fundamental norm was not contested. Financial instruments, such as the allocation of funds for democracy support, were contested as insufficient by CSOs and think tanks. Limited contestation revolved around resource allocation within the ENP, questioning whether the Eastern Neighbourhood received disproportionate attention compared to the Southern Neighbourhood (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación, 2014). The Spanish MFA emphasised differentiation, ensuring that EU funding aligns with actual needs rather than geopolitical priorities. Real Instituto Elcano suggested that the EU should adopt an approach similar to the enlargement policy, offering economic incentives linked to democratic progress, without requiring the EU enlargement policy to be extended to include Eastern European countries (Real Instituto Elcano, 2011). CIDOB warned against the prioritisation of short-term security concerns over genuine democracy promotion, cautioning the EU against repeating the same mistakes in its approach to Eastern Europe, as was the case in the Mediterranean (CIDOB, 2011).

The EU's democracy support approach emerged as a contested space shaped by competing national perspectives. The trends observed in the EUMS contestation of their democracy support activities to the EaP in 2011–2022 reflected tensions between geopolitical and normative approaches. They revealed a shift in the EU's approach from a "normative power" to a more pragmatic geopolitical player. Geopolitical considerations, such as stability, security, and economic influence, were increasingly emerging in EUMS democracy support practices, altering the EU's traditional norm-based narrative. This contestation sparked debates on the differentiation of approaches and prioritisation of specific initiatives focused on stabilisation and economic integration. Consequently, democracy support became more entangled with economic and security policies.

6.2 The Russian invasion of Ukraine and reshaping democracy support in the context of the Eastern Neighbourhood

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reshaped the democracy support landscape. The Russian aggression was widely framed as a threat to democratic norms and the principle of rules-based democratic governance, prompting EU institutions and EUMS governments to adopt new strategic commitments to defend democracy. These developments created a dynamic in which, on the one hand, security concerns undermined the EU's normative approach to democracy support, while on the other, geopolitical and security considerations became increasingly intertwined with both the defence of democracy and the broader practice of democracy support itself.

The emerging geopolitical challenge underscored the critical importance of Eastern Europe for the EU's security and geopolitical role, further shifting the EU's approach towards the Eastern Neighbourhood and highlighting differing perceptions of the EU's neighbourhoods. As a result, the logic behind democracy support in the region has fundamentally shifted from cooperation under the EaP umbrella towards the EU enlargement policy. The prospect of membership for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia became closely linked to Europe's stability and democratic future. Enlargement thus emerged as the primary instrument for democracy support in these states, providing a framework for advancing democratic reform agendas in candidate countries. Nevertheless, their inclusion in the EU enlargement

process has not prevented democratic backsliding among candidate states. While some EU support helped safeguard democracy in Moldova and assisted governance reforms in Ukraine as the Russian war there continued, the situation in Georgia deteriorated.

Most changes in the dynamics of democracy support to Eastern Neighbourhood states have naturally been centred on Ukraine. Unsurprisingly, most of the support provided to Ukraine has focused on military assistance and financial aid to bolster resilience. Without Ukraine's ability to effectively defend itself, it is difficult to speak meaningfully about the continuation of the democratising reforms in the country.

The EU mobilised its European Peace Facility (EPF) to support Ukraine militarily. The EPF was established in 2021 as an instrument to enhance the defence capacities of countries undergoing democratic reforms and facing threats to their democratic institutions. Between 2022 and 2024, the EU mobilised €6.1 billion through the EPF to address Ukraine's immediate military and defence needs. However, this military support does not directly involve elements of democracy support. In March 2024, the EU further raised the EPF's financial ceiling by €5 billion through the establishment of a dedicated Ukraine Assistance Fund, bringing the total financial support allocated via the EPF to €11.1 billion (Council of the European Union, 2024a). Additionally, the €50 billion Ukraine Facility, designed to provide support between 2024 and 2027, entered into force the same month. One of the key defined objectives of the Ukraine Facility is to support Ukraine's reforms on its path to EU accession. Pillar III, amounting to €4.76 billion, focuses on helping Ukraine align with EU laws and standards, which includes capacity-building initiatives for CSOs and local governments (European Commission, 2024a).

In 2022, the EU launched the Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM Ukraine), aimed at enhancing the operational capabilities of the Armed Forces of Ukrainian and protecting the civilian population from Russian attacks. In 2024, the mission's mandate was expanded. With increased budget and personnel, the mission now explicitly mentions support for the "re-establishment of Ukrainian government functions and the rule of law in de-occupied areas" linking assistance to the country's law enforcement and civilian security sector reforms with "accession-related commitments" (Council of the European Union, 2024b). This development reflects a more overtly geopolitical orientation of the EU and its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), linking security and democracy in candidate countries (Youngs et al., 2025).

Despite the constraints imposed by martial law, Ukraine has demonstrated some progress in democratising reforms. Following the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine in 2024, the EU's Enlargement Package recognised the country's advances in judicial reform and anti-corruption efforts. Most EU financial assistance to Ukraine is now conditioned on compliance with enlargement criteria (Youngs et al., 2025). However, some CSOs have criticised the EU for being too lenient and releasing funds before the completion of necessary reforms (Youngs et al., 2025). In the meantime, many EUMS signed security cooperation agreements with Ukraine, which included statements supporting Ukraine's future as a democratic state and pledged support for Ukraine's democratic reforms, although the majority contained no concrete provisions for democracy support initiatives.

Moldova, as of September 2025, has a reform-oriented government; therefore, granting it candidate status served as a crucial incentive to sustain the momentum of its reform process and reinforce the government's position. In June 2024, the EU formally initiated accession negotiations with Moldova, and the 2024 Enlargement Package positively assessed the country's democratic progress. However, challenges for Moldova's democratic institutions remain. The EU's support in cyber defence has played a role in mitigating the impact of Russian disinformation campaigns and election interference,

including incidents of vote-buying (Youngs et al., 2025). In October 2024, the European Commission (EC) approved the Moldova Growth Plan, a €1.8 billion support package (European Commission, 2024b). The EU emphasised that disbursements would be contingent upon continued governance reforms (Youngs et al., 2025). The EU has further pledged to increase assistance to counter Russian disinformation regarding Moldova's foreign policy orientation and to tackle Russian election interference, which intensified in the run-up to the September 2025 parliamentary elections.

In the case of Georgia, the EU's approach to the country's democratic backsliding tendency has been marked by a failure to bring about a meaningful change in course. The strategy appeared to rely on incentivising the Georgian government, which in recent years has engaged in anti-Western rhetoric and contestation of liberal democracy, by offering the carrot of EU candidate status. This decision signalled that the EU viewed Georgia and the South Caucasus region as strategically important and sought to emphasise its geopolitical influence within the region. Consequently, Georgia was granted EU candidate status in December 2023 as a means of encouraging the government to fulfil its commitments to democratic reforms. The EU also anticipated that this status would create opportunities for civil society to exert more pressure on the government.

However, in May 2024, the Georgian government reintroduced a controversial "foreign agents" law, requiring civil society and media organisations to register as "foreign agents" if they receive over 20% of their funding from foreign sources. In response to this and other discriminatory legislation, the EU effectively halted accession talks with Georgia, suspended high-level contacts with the Georgian government, and withheld €40 million of security-sector support from the EPF. Additionally, €121 million in annual budget support was suspended, pledging to redirect a large portion towards civil society initiatives (Youngs et al., 2025).

When the Georgian government manipulated the 2024 parliamentary elections, the EU's response was underwhelming. While some EUMS, such as Sweden, cut all aid to the Georgian government, and others like Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia imposed sanctions against the de facto government, the EU refrained from calling for a new election, limiting its response to launching a technical mission to investigate the electoral irregularities. EU statements were rhetorically firm against the Georgian de facto government, but the overall response was seen as insufficient by Georgian civil society. In 2025, the situation is continuing to deteriorate, with numerous opposition leaders being imprisoned and further measures to curb civil society being adopted. The situation in Georgia represents an example of failure of the EU's democracy support strategy in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

In contrast, Armenia has demonstrated notable shifts in its foreign policy and increased cooperation with the EU, alongside visible democratic progress, with support from the EU and EUMS. However, the EU's democracy support in Armenia and Azerbaijan has been significantly impacted by the ongoing security challenges stemming from the war in the Karabakh region (Youngs et al., 2024). In 2023, the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA), stationed along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, began a two-year mandate to monitor the situation. Despite the EU's presence on the border, its mediation efforts, and high-level diplomatic engagements, it was unable to protect the human rights of ethnic Armenians in Karabakh (Youngs et al., 2024). In September 2023, Azerbaijan launched a military offensive against the unrecognised Republic of Artsakh, resulting in a mass exodus of ethnic Armenians who fled to the Republic of Armenia. In response, the EC significantly increased its humanitarian aid to Armenia, surpassing €10 million (European Commission, 2023). While the aid package included some support for democratic initiatives in Armenia, it was primarily focused on economic and investment measures, alongside humanitarian relief (Youngs et al., 2024).

Democracy support to the EaP among the EU member states selected for this case study has also increasingly shifted towards prioritising security concerns. For Poland, democratic Ukraine is closely linked to its national security interests. Poland has long advocated for Ukraine's EU accession and continued this support following the full-scale Russian invasion. Additionally, Poland has provided substantial military assistance, being the first to send significant quantities of military aid to the Ukrainian front, including heavy weaponry.

Poland has also intensified its support for Ukrainian civil society, human rights initiatives, and anti-corruption reforms. This support is part of a broader strategy to align Ukraine with the EU's democratic standards and facilitate its integration into European structures. In 2022, Poland's official development assistance (ODA) reached a record high of over PLN 15 billion (USD 3.38 billion), which represented 0.53% of its Gross National Income (GNI). This nearly threefold increase from the previous year was driven by exceptional support for Ukrainian refugees. Poland ranks among the top countries in terms of the number of refugees taken in, with USD 310 million (9% of ODA) allocated directly to assisting Ukraine, and USD 2.19 billion (63% of ODA) earmarked for supporting refugees within Poland (Grupa Zagranica, 2022).

In Germany, following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, then Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a significant shift in the country's foreign and security policy, with Germany adopting its first national security strategy. Safeguarding democracy is highlighted as one of the strategy's key elements. The strategy references democratic principles 38 times and emphasises the importance of protecting democracy both internally and internationally, although it adopts what it describes as an "interest-driven" approach (Federal Government of Germany, 2023). Furthermore, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development introduced a new civil society support strategy emphasising gender equality promotion and launched its first-ever international digital policy strategy incorporating measures to protect democracy and human rights in the digital realm (Youngs et al., 2025).

Sweden has significantly expanded its democracy support initiatives in Ukraine. Sweden positions itself as a key partner in the country's EU integration process, ensuring that its development assistance aligns with Ukraine's reform priorities and European aspirations. This support includes reform assistance in areas such as anti-corruption, rule of law, and human rights. Sweden is actively supporting Ukraine's efforts to meet EU requirements by providing expert advice on accession negotiations (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden, 2024). Additionally, the country leads EU working groups on the environment and gender equality in Kyiv and coordinates Nordic-Baltic cooperation to support Ukraine's EU accession.

In July 2023, Sweden introduced its new Strategy for Reconstruction and Reform Cooperation with Ukraine for 2023–2027. The strategy aims to strengthen democratic institutions in Ukraine and enhance the country's ability to align with the EU's *acquis communautaire* (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden, 2023). A total of SEK 9 billion has been allocated for these efforts. The strategy outlines several key priority areas of support. First, it includes provisions for free trade, focusing on increasing transparency and reducing corruption in the Ukrainian economy. Additionally, it explicitly commits to supporting human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and gender equality. In this area, activities are designed to strengthen democratic institutions and promote an accountable, independent, and more efficient public administration at both national and local levels. Further, initiatives will aim to support free and independent media, as well as to ensure broader access to information. The strategy also includes efforts to strengthen Ukraine's justice system, prioritising transparency and reduced

corruption risks. It aims to reinforce the role of civil society in ongoing reconstruction and reform, contributing to accountability and justice, with specific support for human rights defenders. Digital transformation is also highlighted as a core component of the strategy.

The strategy also explicitly integrates security and stabilisation within development cooperation. In this area, activities are intended to prevent the destabilisation of Ukrainian society. Support will extend to strengthening cyber security and promoting social cohesion, as well as increasing access to psychosocial support. Additionally, initiatives will focus on reducing the risk of gender-based violence, prioritising the reintegration of ex-combatants and their families. Another key area of focus is providing sustainable solutions for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and their host communities, including creating conditions for safe and durable returns, even from abroad.

Denmark's 2023 Foreign and Security Policy Strategy places a strong emphasis on democracy promotion, with a particular focus on supporting Ukraine and the Eastern Neighbourhood (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2023). The strategy highlights the importance of strengthening institutions in these countries to help them meet EU accession criteria, specifically in areas such as combating corruption, transitioning to cleaner energy, and decentralisation. Additionally, Denmark aims to bolster resilience against Russian influence and disinformation by fostering closer ties with civil society and local media.

In terms of development assistance, Denmark has pledged increased support to Ukraine. In 2025, Denmark proposed expanding civil support through the Ukraine Fund to DKK 1.7 billion. This support will primarily focus on reconstruction efforts in the Mykolaiv region, alongside initiatives in anti-corruption, energy infrastructure, and the green transition (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2025a). Denmark's efforts will also target coordinated reforms and capacity-building in Ukraine and Moldova. Denmark has also intensified its democracy support for Ukraine through direct parliamentary cooperation. The Danish parliament has partnered with Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada to offer guidance on implementing democratic processes and meeting EU accession criteria (The Danish Parliament, 2024). This partnership underscores Denmark's dedication to supporting Ukraine's democratic development and EU integration.

In 2025, the EU's democracy support faces a new challenge following the Trump administration's decision to cut funding for USAID and NED, which traditionally invested significant funds for development cooperation and democracy support initiatives globally. Recipients of democracy support funding, including those in Eastern Europe, had hoped that the EU would step up in response. However, Kaja Kallas, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated that the EU cannot automatically compensate for this reduction in funding (Kyiv Independent, 2025). Kallas also pointed out that, despite the EU providing substantial financial support to many organisations, its presence is often barely visible and suggested that this situation presents an opportunity to make the EU's aid more visible. She emphasised that future EU funding would be more explicitly linked to recipients, ensuring they are aware that the support comes from Europe.

6.3 Contestation of the EU's Democracy Support (DS) in the Southern Neighbourhood between Arab Spring and the aftermath of the 7 October Hamas attack

The EU's democracy support in the Southern Neighbourhood has been marked by internal contestation among member states, driven by, among other issues, differing geopolitical priorities, historical ties, and strategic interests. Moreover, it was the so-called Arab Spring, which erupted in 2011, that tremendously reshaped this landscape, revealing tensions between the EU's normative goals and

pragmatic concerns on the one hand, and on the other, changing the social and political environment in the neighbouring countries (Simon 2014). The EU's initial response to the Arab Spring reflected both the promise and the limitations of European democracy support. The European Commission launched the Partnership for Democracy and Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean in March 2011, promising increased financial support and enhanced political dialogue with transitioning countries (European Commission, 2011). Despite displaying at the time a widespread understanding of the need to promote democratic values, EUMS exhibited significant divergences in their approaches to the dynamic development of the South.

There is no doubt that the Arab Spring created new opportunities for the EU's normatively oriented agenda, as well as exposing the geopolitical and security-driven challenges. As such, it became a turning point for the Southern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the broader Euro-Mediterranean relationship (Scazzieri 2020).

The most recent and probably the most critical turning point was the 7 October Hamas attack and the atrocities committed in southern Israel, followed by Israel's devastating war in Gaza, which profoundly reshaped the political dynamics in the region and posed critical dilemmas for the EU's external action, particularly in balancing its normative commitments with strategic and security interests (Dyduch and Zielińska 2024).

Those developments had obvious consequences for the perception and attitudes towards the DS in the Southern Neighbourhood among the EUMS. The contestation patterns observed among EUMS revealed fundamental tensions between geopolitical and normative approaches to neighbourhood policy (Scazzieri 2020). Countries with direct Mediterranean exposure, particularly Italy and Spain, consistently emphasised stability and migration management alongside democracy support, while the Northern European countries, particularly Sweden but also Germany, maintained a stronger emphasis on normative commitments while adapting to security and economic realities.

Italy prioritised stability concerns and migration management, often supporting approaches that favoured gradual reform over rapid democratic transition. Historically, Italy has been an active, though not always high-profile, supporter of democracy assistance and human rights, particularly within multilateral and EU frameworks. Its approach has typically reflected a technocratic, diplomatic tradition rooted in multilateralism, human rights promotion, and development cooperation. Italy contributed to electoral assistance missions, supported gender equality initiatives, and played an important role in regional efforts such as those led by the EU, OSCE, and the UN. The country also invested in stabilisation efforts, particularly in the MENA region and parts of Africa, often combining development aid with human rights dialogue.

The 2015 migration crisis starkly highlighted the vulnerability of Italy, and the broader EU, to instability in the region. The Italian government advocated within the EU the view that political instability in the Southern neighbours, particularly Libya, poses immediate political, economic, and migratory risks for both Italy and Europe. It argued that such challenges should be addressed by the EU in a spirit of solidarity and shared responsibility (Francescon 2015). The lack of concrete measures and the prolonged process of defining a joint EU migration crisis management strategy have caused disappointment and frustration in Italy. Italian political leaders repeatedly criticised the EU's failure to adopt binding burden-sharing mechanisms and insisted on urgent solidarity (Guardian - AFP 2015).

However, the election, which resulted in Giorgia Meloni and her far-right Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI) party coming to power in 2022, marked a potential turning point (Mezran and Pavia, 2023).

Meloni's government's rhetoric and stances, particularly regarding migration, minority rights, and LGBTQ+ issues, raised concerns about the coherence of Italy's external democracy support with its internal political orientation. Despite this, no significant rollback of democracy assistance policies has occurred. This is largely due to the institutional inertia and administrative autonomy of Italy's foreign policy and aid apparatus, which continues to drive existing commitments, for example, participation in election observation, support for women's health in Afghanistan, and involvement in AI-human rights dialogues. Moreover, Italy has joined Sweden and Lithuania in an anti-terrorism training mission in Mozambique (Jones 2023: 4).

In this sense, Italy's support for democracy has evolved from a value-driven, multilateral engagement model to a more contested and layered approach, where technical continuity coexists with ideological ambivalence. While administrative structures preserve past commitments, political leadership exhibits selective engagement, occasionally at odds with broader international human rights frameworks.

Moreover, to mitigate the challenges and disadvantages stemming from the EU's withdrawal from large-scale Russian gas imports following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Italy has significantly expanded its energy cooperation with Algeria, becoming its largest gas purchaser. Eni, the Italian multinational oil and gas company, has also signed agreements to increase natural gas imports from Angola, Libya, and the Republic of Congo, often overlooking serious human rights concerns in these countries (Jones 2023: 6).

Most recently, the 7 October 2023 attack by Hamas on Israel and its aftermath marked a profound turning point in the EU's approach to its Southern Neighbourhood, and Italy's stance was no exception. As a first reaction, President Sergio Mattarella and Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni offered unwavering condemnation of the brutal assault on Israel, affirming Italy's solidarity with Israeli citizens and Jewish communities. Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani echoed this message, emphasising Israel's legitimate right to self-defence while calling for restraint and civilian protection, and warning against humanitarian law violations (MFA IC 2023). At the EU level, Italy underlined the urgent need for a unified European response to prevent escalation and secure long-term stability in the region. Tajani advocated for greater EU engagement and support for an Arab-led UN peacekeeping mission, signalling Italy's willingness to lead diplomatic mediation efforts, particularly in support of Palestinian civilian protection. Domestically, Italy also reinforced this balanced approach through humanitarian measures, such as dispatching the hospital ship *Vulcano* to Gaza. Operating out of Egypt's Al Arish harbour since November 2023, the ship returned to Italy in February 2024 with wounded Palestinian children on board, which was performed as a concrete demonstration of Italy's commitment to noncombatant aid to Gazans (MD 2024). Italy's diplomats firmly opposed proposals for the forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza, declaring that such plans are "not and will never be an acceptable option" and repeatedly calling for an end to the war, expressing full support for the Egypt-led Arab recovery plan for Gaza's reconstruction. The government in Rome further cautioned against a new regional spiral of conflict, especially in 2024 across the Israel–Lebanon border, where Italy contributes troops to UNIFIL, and emphasised that Italy and the EU must lead with both political engagement and humanitarian diplomacy to prevent the war from expanding (Balmer 2024).

Yet Italy's actions regarding the most recent escalation of the Middle East conflict are reactive in their nature, with the response to the deterioration of the security and humanitarian situation in the region rather limited to diplomatic narratives and sometimes contradictory gestures. An illustrative example is the most recent Italian rejection of the Dutch initiative to initiate a review of the EU–Israel Association Agreement in the light of the preservation of the human rights clause under its Article 2.

The step (backed by 17 EU Member States) reflects growing concern over Israel's conduct in Gaza amid severe humanitarian consequences (Cîrlig 2025). Italy, along with a few other EUMS, has opposed such measures. This reflected the continuous absence of a common EU position on the war in Gaza. As noted by CIDOB, "Israel has had the unconditional backing of European states such as Germany, Austria, Italy, the Czech Republic and Hungary, who have blocked any attempt to bring pressure to bear on the Israeli government" (Bourekba 2025).

Within the past two years, Italy has declaratively reinforced its normative approach, especially in the multilateral EU context, while in terms of its own policies (foreign, security and economic), it has tried to maintain a pragmatic orientation, driven by geostrategic logic. Importantly, these efforts have been viewed by human rights organisations not only as inconsistent with Italy's declarative normative foreign policy identity but even as violations of international law. A striking example is the case of Israel's energy ministry awarding 12 exploration licences to six companies – including Italy's state-owned company, Eni – to explore for natural gas off the country's Mediterranean coast. The exploration licences were granted in late October 2023, with Eni among the winning companies. It is worth noting that US law firm Foley Hoag LLP, representing Al-Haq, Al-Mezan, and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), sent a warning letter to Eni, urging the company not to exploit the gas fields in an area known as Zone G. According to the Palestinian Authority, 62% of this zone lies within maritime areas claimed by Palestine. Palestine declared its maritime borders – including its exclusive economic zone – upon acceding to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 2015 and presented a detailed claim in 2019 (Eni SpA 2024, PCHR 2024). Apart from legal questions and unresolved territorial disputes, this particular example raises concerns about the consistency and effectiveness of Italy's mixed approach to managing its neighbourhood (Euro-Mediterranean) policy, one that seeks to reconcile liberal-normative principles with pragmatic geopolitical considerations. The core question, in particular, shifts toward identifying which objective is ultimately privileged and, if they are contradictory, which is subordinated to the other.

Germany has adopted a systematic and institutionalised approach to democracy support in the Southern Neighbourhood, reflecting broader subregional ambitions to play the role of a civil power, as well as a supporter and advocate of ENP. Though the literature notes occasional deviations from the country's traditional foreign policy role, such as its diplomatic behaviour during the NATO operation in Libya in 2011, Germany refused to contribute militarily to the operation and abstained from siding with its traditional allies (the US, France and the UK) when voting in the UN Security Council (resolution 1973 of March 2011) (Brummer 2024). Even these cannot be seen as a showcase of democracy support contestation as a core element of the civic power role identity. Foreign Minister Westerwelle clearly formulated Germany's moral and political stance. In a Bundestag debate just before the UN Security Council vote in March 2011, he strongly condemned Gaddafi's actions and expressed solidarity with democratic movements in North Africa. His statements underscored Germany's commitment to freedom and human rights, aligning with its civilian power identity (Brummer 2024). Notwithstanding the substantial increases of German aid to Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries, however, after almost a decade, as Mark Furness from the German Development Institute in Bonn states, this had not "been accompanied by a public strategy setting out Germany's objectives in the region, and the role of aid in conjunction with other policy tools in achieving them" (Furness 2019).

As for specific reactions to the dynamic development in the EU Southern Neighbourhood, especially after 2011, Germany advocated for systematic support for democratic transitions in the MENA region while maintaining caution about rapid political changes that could destabilise the region. It has also

shown greater openness to strengthening EU-North Africa relations and deepening bilateral ties, which, for many commentators, was seen as an “opportunistic geo-economic strategy”, and for some was likely overstated. Yet this reassessed German approach has been facing several challenges, such as the intensifying need for balancing its support for moderate Islamist regimes with its firm commitment to Israel (Berh 2012).

Despite the overall commitment of key German federal institutions, such as the Federal Foreign Office and the Chancellery, to the democracy support (DS) agenda, it faced contestation from various quarters. Die Linke advanced “an anti-imperialist critique”, arguing that German and EU initiatives in the Southern Neighbourhood primarily served to extend Western political and economic influence. Party representatives contended that these efforts operated as vehicles for imposing neoliberal economic models on Mediterranean partner countries under the pretext of promoting democracy.

At the opposite end of the political spectrum, the Free Democratic Party (FDP) advocated for stricter conditionality in German and EU democracy support, emphasising that economic assistance should be tied to tangible democratic reforms. However, this position faced opposition from business associations and economic ministries, which argued that excessive conditionality risked undermining German commercial interests in the region.

German NGOs criticised the country’s democracy support efforts for insufficient inclusion of civil society actors in the formulation of strategic priorities. Additionally, critics argued that Germany’s economic and security interests constrained the scope and effectiveness of its democracy support initiatives. Civil society actors particularly condemned German engagement with authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Algeria, contending that such economic partnerships undermined the normative objectives of democracy promotion (German NGO’s Coalition 2016).

A turning point in Germany’s approach to the ENP, particularly in terms of its normative, value-oriented engagement with Southern Neighbourhood countries, was the 2015 migration crisis, which to a great extent was a result of turbulent and dramatic post-Arab Spring developments. Germany’s immediate response was marked not only by openness but also by profound political and societal contestation. Initially, the Merkel government’s decision to suspend the “Dublin Regulation” for Syrians and open the borders was framed through a humanitarian, legal, and cosmopolitan lens, presenting Germany as a moral leader committed to universal values and solidarity. This framing, however, downplayed national sovereignty, cultural difference, and security concerns (Drewski and Gerhards 2024). While the opposition parties largely supported the government’s humanitarian framing, this broad consensus created a political space for the rise of right-wing populist actors like the AfD, who fiercely rejected mainstream political elites’ arguments. The AfD promoted a competing frame that emphasised national sovereignty, cultural homogeneity, and securitisation, portraying refugees as “migrants”, threats to welfare and security, and incompatible with German identity. Contestation also emerged within the ruling coalition. The CSU, Merkel’s conservative Bavarian partner, strongly criticised the open-door policy and pushed for stricter border controls, eventually contributing to a policy shift in late 2015 and early 2016. This shift did not fully abandon humanitarian frames but realigned them to justify new restrictions, drawing a sharper line between “deserving” refugees and “undeserving” economic migrants, a process described as “humanitarian securitisation” (Drewski and Gerhards 2024).

Overall, the German approach emphasised the complementarity between security cooperation and democracy support, with the political elites particularly arguing that effective governance and rule of law development contributed to regional security. Yet the German civil society organisations contested

the increasing securitisation of development aid that potentially compromised the independence of democracy support initiatives.

The most recent (2023–2024) dramatic developments in the Middle East profoundly influenced European public opinion and triggered a wave of largely uncoordinated and reactive political measures at the EU level, devoid of strategic coherence or long-term significance. This was also very much true for the German stance and reactions. Germany's longstanding policy principle that Israel's security is a matter of "reason of state" (Staatsräson), rooted in Holocaust memory and a sense of moral responsibility, has caught German policymakers and diplomats in a tension with their commitment to the normative principles of a civilian power role. This has been particularly evident as the situation in the Gaza Strip has deteriorated into a humanitarian catastrophe. From words of solidarity and full support to Israel after 7 October 2023, both diplomatically (in consecutive voting initiatives in the UN aiming at condemning Israel or upgrading Palestinian self-determination right, Germany was never in favour) and militarily,² Germany under Chancellor Friedrich Merz has adopted a notably harsher tone, which directly refers to the Israeli blockade of Gaza imposed since 2 March 2025, labelling Israel's Gaza strategy as "increasingly incomprehensible" and expressing concern over breaches of international humanitarian law (Thurau 2025). This followed SPD politicians' public calls for a halt to arms exports to Israel, warning of potential German complicity in human rights violations, which actually continued despite the assessment of German Foreign Minister Johann Wadepful in July 2025 that the situation in Gaza is "beyond imagination". To counterbalance its value-oriented political powerlessness, Berlin emphasised its commitment to substantial humanitarian funding for operations in the Palestinian territories, amounting to USD 350 million since October 2023 (Hahn 2025).

Poland, while aligning with broader EU objectives in democracy promotion when addressing the Southern Neighbourhood, prioritised and focused on Eastern Europe. As stressed by Polish Foreign Minister Sikorski as early as 2008: "we in Poland make a distinction between the southern dimension and the eastern dimension of the ENP and it consists in this: to the south, we have neighbours of Europe, to the east we have European neighbours" (Devrim and Schulz 2009, p. 5). Following the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) to re-energise the EU's relations with its Southern neighbours, Poland (together with Sweden) spearheaded a parallel initiative directed at the East in the form of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Targeting the relations with six Eastern/Southeastern neighbours (Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), the initiative was rooted in the ENP principles (differentiation, conditionality, regionalisation). It strongly emphasised the importance of the promotion of EU values (democracy, rule of law), and in Poland's view emerged as a counterbalance to the southern-focused UfM. This in turn reflected Poland's discontent with the concept of the EU's pivot to the South, especially promoted by France under Sarkozy, which in Warsaw's eyes could undermine Eastern European concerns.

The trend continued, and Poland's democracy support agenda was subject to internal contestation, particularly regarding resource allocation and strategic focus. While there was a principled support for democracy promotion, what was primarily contested was the appropriateness of committing substantial resources to the Mediterranean region, given persistent challenges in Eastern Europe and pressing domestic priorities. This contestation, in turn, reflected broader intra-EU geopolitical

² Following the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023, Germany substantially increased its military support to Israel. The Bundestag disclosed in June 2025 that between 7 October 2023 and 13 May 2025, Germany approved military exports to Israel worth over €485 million, including firearms, ammunition, weapon parts, and armoured vehicles. For more, see Haque 2025.

dynamics and revealed both the limits of consensus around the ENP's single-framework vision and the differing preferences and rivalries among EU member states.

However, the specific consensus and alliances seeking culture within the EU encouraged Poland to look for strategic partners to intensify the EU's engagement in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Poland has tactically supported the actions and initiatives of states more interested in strengthening the Southern Neighbourhood (Dyduch 2016). Polish policymakers have consistently contended that the EU's experience with democratisation in Eastern Europe offers valuable insights applicable to the Southern Neighbourhood. Especially since 2011, Polish diplomacy has advocated for the transfer of Eastern European democratisation models to North Africa, with particular emphasis on the strengthening of civil society, media freedom, and the rule of law. This was particularly evident during Poland's first Presidency of the EU Council, most notably through Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski's 2011 initiative to create an endowment for democracy aimed at supporting democratic organisations and civil society in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood (Clüver Ashbrook 2011). The rationale and arguments in favour of the establishment of the new institution were connected to criticism of the existing over-bureaucratised and slow, and therefore insufficient and ineffective EU institutions procedures. The Polish Presidency's flagship initiative ultimately materialised in the form of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), launched only in 2013 (Przybylska-Maszner 2016). Although the EED was born out of criticism of the EU's existing democracy support instruments, it has itself been criticised and contested for failing to add significant new value to the existing institutional framework for EU democracy promotion and support. Another criticism was that the foundation was primarily designed to support rather small and short-term projects, which has limited its ability to provide strategic, long-term support (Fuksiewicz 2013, p. 12).

Poland has long been regarded as an exemplary case of successful Europeanisation, measured by the country's adaptation of policies and institutions to EU liberal-democratic norms and standards. However, from 2015, and the rise to power of the right-wing populist coalition led by Law and Justice (PiS), the door was opened to far-reaching contestation of liberalism and liberal democracy and the way it aimed to manage the key internal policy issues and external challenges (as environmental policy connected with green-energy transition, migration and asylum policy especially in the light of the EU vision of how to handle the migration crisis). Since then, the EU-Brussels normative agenda has been under permanent and intensifying criticism, along with the idea of ever-closer European integration and further supra-nationalisation of the EU and its core policies, such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (Müller et al. 2025). The illiberal turn and democratic backsliding in Poland revealed a paradox in the country's redefined foreign policy identity vis-à-vis its approach to democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. Despite domestic democratic backsliding since 2015, Poland has largely maintained continuity in its support for democracy. Initiatives such as the Solidarity Fund PL, Polish Aid, and scholarship programmes for Ukrainian and Belarusian youth have remained active. Poland has continued to support local governance reform, independent media, and civil society. However, this focus has been directed almost exclusively toward the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood (Belarus and Ukraine in particular), with limited attention given to promoting democratisation in the Southern Neighbourhood. While support for the Eastern Partnership has persisted, democracy promotion in the South has increasingly given way to more pragmatic, stability-oriented, and geopolitical goals (Petrova and Aydın-Düzgit 2021).

In this context, Poland's continued international democracy support, despite its own illiberal turn, underscored the strategic rather than normative logic behind such efforts. Thus, Poland's democracy

promotion in the East appears to be driven less by a normative commitment to liberal democratic values and more by geopolitical calculations, particularly the aim of creating a buffer zone between Russia and the EU. While democracy support in the Southern Neighbourhood was either neglected or overshadowed by politically motivated illiberal alliances, one notable example is the rapprochement between Poland's right-wing government and Netanyahu's Israel, beginning in 2016. This alignment was underpinned by shared policy perspectives, including strong criticism of the EU, anti-Muslim rhetoric, and a mutual enthusiasm for Trumpism, a new version of Atlanticism centred on the political ideas and policies of US President Donald Trump. Furthermore, the PiS government has shown limited engagement in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and has attributed a low priority to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which was the longstanding EU priority. While Polish diplomacy under PiS was reluctant to fully embrace Europeanised foreign policy objectives, it did not openly contest the EU's established normative positions on the Israeli Palestinian issue; instead, it was driven by tactical considerations and a narrowly defined perception of national interest (Dyduch and Müller 2021).

Poland's response to the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict following 7 October 2023 largely reflected continuity, though notable shifts also emerged. Among the key transformative factors were the post-election change of government in December 2023, which led to a realignment with the EU-Brussels position, and evolving public attitudes shaped by the rapidly worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza (Dyduch 2025). The change in government from PiS to the liberal-left Civic Coalition marked a clear shift in Poland's international orientation. While maintaining official continuity in Middle East policy, the new government under Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski adopted a more explicitly pro-European stance, emphasising multilateralism and adherence to international law. Though historically, Poland sought a balanced position regarding Israel and Palestine, both supporting Israel's security concerns and maintaining (since 1988) the recognition of Palestinian statehood, a closer look at Poland's UN voting patterns on issues related to the Middle East peace process from late 2023 onwards reveals a notable shift. Traditionally, Poland often leaned toward Israel, abstaining in key votes such as that on Palestine's UNESCO membership in 2011, the 2012 UN GA vote on upgrading Palestine's status to a non-member observer state, and the vote on a 2017 resolution following the US decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem. Most importantly, however, in May 2024, Poland supported a UN General Assembly resolution expanding Palestine's rights in the United Nations, a move that drew sharp criticism from Israeli officials but aligned Poland more closely with broader EU positions.

Poland's response to the Gaza conflict cannot be understood in isolation from the war in Ukraine. As one of Ukraine's strongest supporters, Poland has emphasised the importance of international law, civilian protection, and the right to self-determination, principles that naturally extend to its views on Palestinian issues. Many Polish observers have drawn parallels between civilian suffering in Gaza and in Ukraine, reinforcing public sympathy for non-combatants caught in conflict zones. This connection has been strengthened by Israeli reluctance to provide military support to Ukraine, which some Polish officials view as insufficiently supportive of a fellow democracy under attack.

For decades, Sweden upheld a proactive and strong approach to democracy support in the Southern Neighbourhood, prioritising human rights, gender equality, and civil society empowerment. Reflecting its development cooperation principles, Sweden consistently advocated for EU strategies that emphasised normative goals, such as media freedom and minority rights over stability-driven concerns, promoting a holistic and sustainable model of democratic development. In particular, since the end of the Cold War, the official policy goal of fostering international democratic development has become a key cornerstone of Swedish development assistance, and, as J. K. Schaffer emphasises,

democracy promotion became a key aim of Sweden's development aid policy (2021, p. 165). This was carried out within the EU framework as well as through mini-lateral formats, moving beyond the standard EU schema (Aggestam and Bicchi 2019). Notwithstanding this, Sweden also managed to assume a leading role among like-minded states in shaping EU development policies, with a particular focus on Central and Eastern European countries.

Meanwhile, Swedish approaches to democracy support and development aid, following the terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001 and the later "War on Terror", experienced the increasing securitisation of foreign aid. Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrated the futility of exporting electoral democracy to collapsed states, while the hopes of democratic transformation after the Arab Spring in 2011 were quickly crushed (Schaffer 2021, p. 162).

However, somewhat unsurprisingly, in a time of growing tensions and geopolitical instability, the normative and value-oriented Swedish approach to democracy support changed when facing the domestic contestation over its effectiveness and allocation of resources. Probably the most vocal and sharpest critic of the Swedish normative "exceptionalism" is the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD), a populist, radical-right (PRR) political party (Bulent 2021). Contesting voices came primarily, albeit not exclusively, from SD, which questioned whether significant funding had generated tangible democratic progress in North Africa and the Levant. They advocated for redirecting democracy support funds toward domestic priorities and humanitarian assistance.

Meanwhile, and in contrast, left-wing parties advocated for expanding democracy support while ensuring its independence from security and economic agendas. Both the Green Party and the Left Party emphasised that Swedish and EU democracy promotion should avoid compromising with authoritarian regimes for strategic or economic gain. This growing internal divergence and polarisation revealed the internal debate inconstancy impacting Sweden's long-lasting and already well-deserved image of "humanitarian superpower" and its innovative framework of the feminist foreign policy (Simons and Manoilo 2019).

What particularly captured the attention of both national political elites and social actors, and resonated in Swedish public opinion debates, was the dichotomous vision of the EU's engagement with post-Arab Spring regime changes. This was especially evident in the fundamental tension between concerns for political stability and the promotion of democracy, powerfully illustrated by the 2013 military coup in Egypt that removed elected President Mohamed Morsi. This event created a dilemma for policymakers torn between supporting democratic legitimacy and maintaining regional stability, which in turn sparked criticism among the Swedish (but also, for instance, German) political and social environment. The contestation of Sweden's engagement in development aid connected with the democratisation of the Southern EU Neighbourhood was further fuelled by parallel internal/domestic Swedish phenomena: challenges and failure of the assimilation policy, especially regarding immigrants from the MENA region and increasing violence within the migrants' communities and growing tension between Sweden's minorities and majority population (Neuding 2018, Bulent 2021).

Sweden's longstanding engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, particularly its advocacy for a two-state solution and support for Palestinian self-determination, has had a significant impact on its political approach and social attitudes toward the Southern Neighbourhood in general, and the Middle East in particular. Sweden's recognition of Palestinian statehood in October 2014 (Badarin 2020) underscored the international community's, particularly Sweden's, role in shaping the international order and was linked to the belief that "international state-building had helped the emergence of a state in Palestine" (Kyrus 2024), rather than merely supporting bottom-up

democratisation and civic movements. On the other hand, it has been quite widely contested both domestically and internationally. Sweden's decision to unilaterally recognise the State of Palestine drew criticism from opposition parties, who argued that the move was premature and politically isolated. Liberal Party spokesperson Birgitta Ohlsson criticised the government for recognising a state that lacks full territorial control, highlighting the division between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza. She also claimed that the move breaks with the EU's position. Moderate Party spokesperson Karin Enström echoed these concerns, stating that the decision violates Sweden's own recognition doctrine and weakens EU foreign policy coherence (Sveriges Radio 2014).

In the context of the most recent, post-7 October developments in the Middle East, one could get the impression that the tone of Swedish foreign policy has undergone a kind of recalibration in terms of the country's engagement, emphasising rather security concerns, opting for conditionality aid, and aligning with broader EU debates. In an almost immediate response to the 7 October Hamas atrocities, the Swedish domestic political pressure (mainly from the Sweden Democrats) influenced the government's move to freeze development aid to Palestine (Government Offices in Sweden 2023). In response, a coalition of Swedish civil society organisations operating in Palestine issued a joint statement condemning Hamas's recent attacks on Israeli civilians as acts of terrorism, aligning with the Swedish government's position. However, they expressed concern over the government's decision to freeze development aid to Palestine, arguing that this move is counterproductive to peace efforts and risks strengthening extremist actors like Hamas. The organisations emphasised that Swedish aid supports democratic actors in both Palestine and Israel, promotes human rights, and holds both Israeli and Palestinian authorities accountable (We Effect 2023).

The complexity and multidimensional nature of Sweden's response to the escalating Middle East Conflict and deteriorating humanitarian situation in the Palestinian Territories could be illustrated by recalling the decision to stop funding to the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) in response to Israel's decision to ban UNRWA operations beginning in January 2025, and redirecting its humanitarian aid (which was increased in 2024 from 451 million SEK to 800 million SEK in 2025), through alternative international organisations such as the WFP, UNICEF, UNFPA, and ICRC (France24 2024). The move, which was strongly criticised by UNRWA Commissioner General Philippe Lazzarini (UNRWA 2024), was also condemned by the Palestinian embassy in Stockholm (France 24 2024).

To conclude, it can be said that the Swedish approach shifted from its traditional course, and the new ruling coalition made up of right-wing parties, supported by the far-right Sweden Democrats, has already abandoned the country's feminist foreign policy, raising broader doubts about whether the country will continue to lead the EU in democracy (Jones 2023: 7).

The Danish approach to development cooperation has undergone profound changes since the 1990s, shifting from a relatively idealistic focus on poverty reduction to a more pragmatic, politically driven one shaped by domestic priorities and international trends. Unlike its Scandinavian neighbours (Sweden and Norway), Denmark's aid has lacked strong humanitarian or exceptionalist motivations and has instead reflected mercantilist and reactive tendencies (Engberg-Pedersen and Moe Fejerskov 2021). The intersection of security concerns and development aid came to dominate foreign aid, with funds increasingly channelled toward fragile states, most notably Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia.

Denmark's "Arab Initiative", launched in 2003, aimed to support democratic reforms and intercultural dialogue but faced challenges due to limited impact and growing political fatigue. The Danish government remained aligned with US strategies, though interest waned amid concerns over

instability and the fallout from the 2006 “cartoon crisis”,³ which damaged Denmark’s credibility in the region (Malmvig 2015).⁴

However, the Arab Spring in 2011 marked a significant turning point. The uprisings re-energised Danish foreign policy, leading both the outgoing and incoming Danish governments that year to maintain democracy promotion efforts, believing the revolts aligned with Denmark’s long-term goals in the region. Danish policy responses to the Arab Spring were initially based on a broad parliamentary consensus, and, interestingly, Denmark’s political elites have seen the protest movement in the Arab states as a result of their own engagement in supporting civil society. In a parliamentary debate on 23 March 2011, the minister of foreign affairs said, “It is with particularly great satisfaction that I during these weeks assess the efforts that Denmark has made since 2003 in promoting reform and democracy in the Arab World. Through Partnership for Dialogue and Reform – previously called the Arab Initiative – we have supported many of the groups that are now demanding that their voices be heard” (Boserup 2012, pp. 100–101). Relatively soon, however, it turned out that while initial hopes were high, countries like Egypt and Tunisia quickly saw deepening divisions between secularists and Islamists, growing authoritarian tendencies, and shrinking space for civil society – including crackdowns on foreign-funded NGOs, a key channel for Danish support. For political actors in Denmark as well as the rest of the EU, it has become clear that their normative agenda competes with more pragmatic and illiberal regional influences from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, who offer substantial financial aid without democratic conditionality, which undermined the value-based approach and performed for its limited influence (Makmvig and Lassen 2013).

Furthermore, as with other EU countries, the 2015 migration crisis also significantly reshaped Denmark’s development assistance due to a surge in asylum seekers, particularly from Syria. The reallocation of most of the funds to in-country asylum costs severely impacted other areas of aid: bilateral assistance, climate funding, and UN-based multilateral aid, which suggests far-reaching instrumentalisation of aid for domestic political purposes (Engberg-Pedersen and Moe Fejerskov 2021).

Finally, the 7 October Hamas atrocities against Israeli citizens and Israel’s subsequent retaliation and revenge in the Gaza Strip, accompanied by increasing violence against Palestinians both there and in the West Bank, led the Danish political establishment to react and reconsider the foundations of its Euro-Mediterranean policy. From the very day of the attacks, the Danish government strongly condemned Hamas’s terrorist operations against Israeli civilians, stating that “there can be no justification for terror” and affirming Israel’s right to defend itself in accordance with international humanitarian law (Permanent Mission of Denmark to the UN in New York 2023). As the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip worsened, Denmark has repeatedly called for the release of all Israeli hostages, while also expressing deep concern about the escalating crisis in Gaza. This was followed by an announcement in December 2023 that Denmark would resume nearly \$10.4 million in development aid to Palestine, which had been suspended shortly after the 7 October attacks. Confirming the decision, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen noted that other European countries and the EU had made similar decisions. The move came amid growing domestic pressure, as thousands in Denmark

³ In September 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, which sparked widespread outrage among Muslims globally, as many consider any depiction of the Prophet to be blasphemous (Freedom House 2006).

⁴ The Danish Arab Partnership Programme (DAPP), renewed in 2022 and which will run until 2027, includes Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan, and focuses on youth unemployment and exclusion, job creation, civic engagement, human rights and inclusion and gender equality, free and diverse media (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark 2025b).

participated in pro-Palestinian demonstrations calling for a ceasefire and condemning Israel's military response in Gaza as genocide (The Local 2023). It is worth mentioning that the Danish stance toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict differed from that of other Nordic countries, Sweden in particular. The Danish government provides substantial funding to Israeli and Palestinian NGOs through DANIDA, the UN, and partner organisations like DanChurchAid, Oxfam Novib, and the Norwegian Refugee Council. Between 2023 and 2024, Denmark disbursed approximately DKK 608 million (~\$95 million) for projects in the West Bank and Gaza. However, concerns have arisen that several of the NGOs receiving Danish funds are involved in political campaigns – such as BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) and legal actions against Israel – that contradict Denmark's official support for a peaceful two-state solution. In response, Denmark has taken a firm anti-BDS stance. In December 2017, then-Foreign Minister Anders Samuelsen announced stricter conditions for aid to Palestinian NGOs. This was followed in 2018 by a formal policy that explicitly barred Danish funding for organisations engaged in BDS, connected to terrorist movements, violating human rights norms, or questioning Israel's right to exist (NGO Monitor 2025). In general, Denmark has been supporting a two-state solution and has quite consistently opposed unilateral recognition of the Palestinian state, a stance rather broadly supported within the political spectrum. In May 2024, however, four left-wing parties, with MP Sascha Faxe of The Alternative, introduced a bill to recognise a Palestinian state to the Danish parliament, arguing that such a move would be essential for achieving lasting peace and ensuring rights for Palestinians. The Danish parliament rejected this proposal, and the foreign minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, although absent from the debate, has previously stated that while Denmark currently cannot recognise Palestine due to the lack of a functioning governance structure, he hopes such recognition will be possible in the future. The vote came amid growing European recognition of Palestine, following such a move by Spain, Ireland, and Norway (Rasmussen 2024). Meanwhile, the issue of Palestine's recognition and the policy orientations towards the conflict have become a reason and substance of the notable gap between public sentiment and government policy (Hunter 2024).

To conclude, Denmark's approach to DS in the Southern Neighbourhood reflected a pragmatic foreign policy orientation and a focus on effective, results-oriented development cooperation. Danish policymakers emphasised institutional capacity building, governance reforms, and anti-corruption measures, supporting EU initiatives aimed at strengthening public administration and economic governance in partner countries. However, DS support faced contestation regarding the balance between democracy promotion and other policy objectives. The Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti (DF), for instance, consistently called for reducing development aid and democracy support funding, arguing for reallocating resources toward domestic priorities. On the contrary, Danish civil society organisations criticised the integration of democracy support with security and migration agendas, arguing that such conditionality undermined the credibility and effectiveness of democratic promotion. Tensions between democracy support and other policy priorities, such as energy cooperation, migration management, and trade, were increasingly evident in Danish policy debates. Civil society actors called for safeguarding the independence of democracy promotion from competing strategic interests.

Traditionally, Spain advocated for increased EU engagement in democracy support while emphasising the need for coordinated European responses that would avoid the mistakes of unilateral interventions. At the same time, Spain has positioned itself as a strong advocate for maintaining a balanced approach between the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and Spanish policymakers have consistently argued that the Eastern Neighbourhood should not receive disproportionate attention or resources at the expense of

Mediterranean partners. As stressed by Spanish Foreign Minister Arancha González Laya (2020–2021): “The Eastern European countries have to feel the same affinity to the Southern neighbourhood that Spain feels to the Eastern neighbourhood” (Arancha González Laya 2021).

Although Spanish diplomacy has consistently emphasised that financial allocations should reflect the genuine democratic needs of partner countries rather than being driven solely by geopolitical considerations, political circles and civil society organisations in Spain have primarily focused on MENA countries, particularly the North African states, due to their geographical proximity and shared sociopolitical concerns. They have also been raising the problem of the EU’s insufficient response to democratic backsliding in countries such as Tunisia, arguing that the emphasis on stability and economic cooperation undermines the credibility of the EU’s democracy support.

Meanwhile, Spain has deepened its cooperation with Morocco primarily due to concerns over migration. Following a period of particularly strained Spanish-Moroccan relations, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez visited Rabat in April 2022, shortly after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, to inaugurate what he described as “a new stage in relations between the two kingdoms, based on transparency and mutual respect” (Statement by the Royal Office 2022), after a year-long diplomatic crisis. The rift began when Spain allowed the Polisario Front leader, Brahim Ghali, to receive medical treatment, angering Morocco. Tensions peaked with a mass migrant surge into Spain’s Ceuta enclave, widely seen as Moroccan retaliation. The visit followed a major policy shift from Spain in March, endorsing Morocco’s autonomy plan for Western Sahara, abandoning its previous neutrality. This move sparked a domestic backlash in Spain and provoked Algeria, a Polisario supporter and major gas supplier to Spain, which recalled its ambassador. Both domestic and international critics of the government in Madrid have been portrayed as a Spanish abandonment of support for the Sahrawi people’s right to self-determination, in favour of endorsing Morocco’s autonomy plan, undermining the Spanish-proclaimed commitment to democratic values and international law (France24 2022). While Spain seeks Morocco’s support in curbing irregular migration, Morocco prioritises international recognition of its claim over Western Sahara.

This realignment raises questions about the selective approach to democratic norms promotion in Spanish foreign policy. While the Spanish government continues to emphasise its commitment to DS, its position towards Morocco’s contested sovereignty over Western Sahara, which runs counter to UN resolutions and self-determination principles, reveals a clear instance of normative inconsistency and political pragmatism. This inconsistency is particularly striking when contrasted with Spanish political elites’ rhetoric on the Palestinian right to self-determination and their criticism of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

Spain unequivocally condemned the Hamas terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023, describing them as “atrocious” and reaffirming Israel’s right to self-defence under international humanitarian law (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación 2024). At the same time, however, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and other senior officials voiced serious concerns over Israel’s military response in Gaza. Sánchez warned that Israel’s actions have been “absolutely disproportionate”, could destabilise the region, and may violate international law (Jones 2023). Spain called for a ceasefire, humanitarian access, protection of civilians, and a renewed commitment to the two-state solution. Eventually, Spain joined Ireland and Norway in formally recognising a Palestinian state, an act Sánchez argued was a necessary moral and geopolitical step, not an attack on Israel (Morel et al. 2024).

Also worth noting is the growing divergence among member states regarding normative and strategic views on what should be prioritised when conceptualising and operationalising the ENP and CFSP:

democratic norms and values, or strategic political interests, which are not always coherent with one another. This particularly concerns critical and transformative events and turning-point processes that brought about, or at least had the potential to bring about, geopolitical changes, such as the Arab Spring, and more recently the post-7 October escalation of the Middle East conflict (especially, though not exclusively, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). For instance, in the case of post-Arab Spring changes in the MENA region – specifically democratic backsliding as in Tunisia or consolidation of authoritarianism as in Egypt under Sisi, while countries such as France and Italy prioritised maintaining engagement to preserve influence and address security concerns being driven more by geopolitical strategic calculation, Spain advocated for a middle path that would maintain dialogue while expressing concerns about democratic reversals. Germany or Sweden, meanwhile, backed more normative options. In many Neighbourhood countries, new or reconstructed political elites, when pursuing pragmatic, interest-oriented relations with the EU, were reluctant to adopt its democratic model, instead prioritising economic gains and large-scale infrastructure projects attractive to European commercial interests. Not only France and Italy, but also the Central and Eastern European member states of the EU, contested efforts to condition economic cooperation on the neighbourhood countries' conformity to European norms and values. They argued that such approaches would damage European commercial interests while failing to influence political developments in the neighbourhood. This challenging dynamic was also clearly visible throughout the turbulent period of the civil war in Syria, which, among many other consequences, triggered the migration wave from the Middle East to Europe (Dimitriadi 2022). The lack of a common stance among EU member states on the dramatically deteriorating situation between Israel and Palestine revealed not only the Union's inefficiency but also its lack of agency to design any relevant policy position, let alone implement substantial policy action. As a result, the ongoing escalation of the conflict has left the EU internally paralysed when it comes to proposing concrete policy solutions that would at least partially correspond to the so-called EU position on the Middle East peace process.

7 Deviations Summary

The preparation of this Working Paper was delayed. In order for the paper to cover two very relevant events in the EU neighbourhoods – the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the aftermath of the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel in October 2023 and the subsequent Israeli military campaign in Gaza – the team of researchers had to gather additional documents beyond the initial timespan planned within WP5 covering the period of 2011–2022. This impacted the work on the overall compilation and comparative analysis in the paper. Personal health issues also had an impact on the finalisation of the deliverable.

8 Conclusions

The key findings demonstrate that the fundamental norm of liberal democracy is essentially not contested by actors in EUMS. However, certain constitutive elements of the norm are subject to occasional contestation, mainly by some think tanks and parliamentary actors. The contestation through the repositioning of the DS as a secondary value to security is a visible feature. This suggests that there is a shift toward a more pragmatic approach; discursively, however, Normative Power Europe is still the dominant approach in the analysed material. This also marks the growing discrepancy between what the EU actors say and what they do and has a devastating impact on the EU's credibility as an actor in the neighbourhood.

Regarding DS for both neighbourhoods, our analysis demonstrates that the logic of democracy promotion and support in the two EU neighbourhoods differs, with diverse patterns of contestation. This results in and reflects two distinct types of actor identities. Both EU neighbourhoods are becoming increasingly geopolitical spaces of operation, specifically because in both, there is an increased deterioration and destabilisation of security caused by Russian aggression on Ukraine in the East and the prolonged war in Gaza. As a result, these have become increasingly less normative spaces.

The emerging trend in the EU and among its member states, similar to that in the 1990s and early 2000s, appears to be a return to a differentiated approach in its neighbourhood policy. As we demonstrated in the empirical section, in Eastern Europe, the EUMS and the EU still aim to promote democratic principles and norms, specifically as part of their enlargement strategy. The Russian aggression on Ukraine actually accelerated this approach but also raised significant contestation in some member states. It seems that many countries are increasingly shifting towards prioritising security concerns in this region, and support for democracy (in Ukraine, for instance) is seen as intertwined with national security interests.

On the contrary, in the South Mediterranean region, due to geopolitical and security-oriented considerations, the EU has stepped back from major projects (e.g. the Union for the Mediterranean). When facing the escalating Middle East conflict, its approach has been reactive and limited to actions aimed at isolating threats and distancing itself from the conflicting parties but providing humanitarian aid for the suffering civilians (which, as in the case of Palestinians in Gaza, failed to meet basic existential needs). Many EUMS have balanced the declaratory normative engagement in the region with pragmatic decisions and collaborations. Support for democracy has been downgraded in many cases. Most notably, however, due to internal disagreements, the EU and its member states were unable to react to the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Gaza and to Israel's atrocities. This inability to react to the worsening situation for months might be the most destructive to the EU's normative claims.

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ANNEX - List of documents used for analysis and quoted in the text

Name of the actor	Title of the document	Year	Link
Alternative für Deutschland	Deutschland. Aber normal. Programm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 20. Deutschen Bundestag	2021	https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/20210611_AfD_Programm_2021.pdf
Andrej Hunko (Die Linke)	EU-Politik der Östlichen Partnerschaft hat einen Scherbenhaufen produziert. Pressemitteilung von Andrej Hunko, 13. Mai 2019.	2019	https://www.linksfraktion.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/detail/eu-politik-der-oestlichen-partnerschaft
CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs)	Soler i Lecha, E., and Viilup, E. (2011). Reviewing the European Neighbourhood Policy: a weak response to fast changing realities.	2011	https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/reviewing-european-neighbourhood-policy-weak-response-fast-changing-realities
Die Linke	ENP – Europäische Nachbarschaftspolitik. Themenpapiere der Fraktion	2022	https://www.linksfraktion.de/themen/az/detailansicht/enp-europaeische-nachbarschaftspolitik/
DIIS (Danish Institute for international studies)	Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook 2012	2012	https://www.diis.dk/files/media/documents/publications/000.yearbook_2012_web.pdf
Freie Demokraten	Europas Chancen nutzen. Das Programm der Freien Demokraten zur Europawahl 2019	2019	https://www.fdp.de/sites/default/files/import/2019-04/7381-fdp-europa-wahlprogramm-a5.pdf
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung	Hett, F., Kikić, S., and Meuser, S. (eds). (2015). Reassessing the European Neighbourhood Policy. The Eastern Dimension.	2015	https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/11483.pdf
German NGO's Coalition	Discussion Paper Civil society threatened all over the world,	2016	https://venro.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Dateien/Dateien/Publikationen/Diskussionspapiere/Zivilgesellschaftliches_Engagement_weltweit_in_Gefahr_final_ENGLISCH_DIGITAL_01.pdf
Grupa Zagranica	Raport "Polska Współpraca Rozwojowa 2011"	2012	https://zagranica.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2011_Raport_Grupy_Zagranica.pdf
Grupa Zagranica	Raport "Polska Współpraca Rozwojowa 2022"	2022	https://zagranica.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Raport_Polska_Wspolpraca_rozwojowa_2022_Grupa_Zagranica.pdf
Istituto Affari Internazionali	Bonvicini, G., and Silvestri, S. (eds). (2015). L'eredità del passato, le sfide del futuro. Il ruolo dell'Italia e dell'Europa nelle relazioni internazionali	2015	https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai50_paper_it_0.pdf
Malte Daniljuk (Die Linke)	Im Kriegszustand: Medien und Menschenrechte in der Ukraine	2018	https://www.linksfraktion.de/themen/nachrichten/detail/im-kriegszustand-medien-und-menschenrechte-in-der-ukraine/
Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación	Estrategia de Acción Exterior. Gobierno de España.	2014	https://intercoconnecta.aecid.es/Documentos%20de%20la%20comunidad/Estrategia_Acci%C3%B3n%20Exterior-2014.pdf
Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej	Strategia Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej 2017-2021	2017	https://www.gov.pl/attachment/8196524f-687b-40e6-aca8-82c53ff8e6db

Prezydent Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej	Wystąpienie podczas Szczytu dla Demokracji	2021	https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wystapienia/wystapienie-prezydenta-podczas-szczytu-dla-demokracji,46245
Rada Ministrów Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej	Priorytety Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej 2012-2016	2012	https://www.bbn.gov.pl/download/1/9620/prpol.pdf
Real Instituto Elcano	Martin, I. (2011). Empleo y políticas de empleo en el Norte de África: de causas de las revueltas a claves de la transición (ARI).	2011	https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/empleo-y-politicas-de-empleo-en-el-norte-de-africa-de-causas-de-las-revueltas-a-claves-de-la-transicion-ari/
Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung	Die Östliche Partnerschaft der EU kritisieren und Sie sich neu aneignen.	2015	https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/sonst_publicationen/rls-onl-dellheim_oestliche_partnerschaft.pdf
Stephan Brandner (AfD)	Stephan Brandner: Deutschland ist afrikapolitisch völlig konzeptlos	2020	https://www.afd.de/stephan-brandner-deutschland-ist-afrikapolitisch-voellig-konzeptlos/
Sveriges riksdag	Protokoll 2015/16:45 Måndagen den 14 december: debatt om internationellt bistånd	2015	https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/protokoll/protokoll-20151645-mandagen-den-14-december_h30945/
VENRO (Verband Entwicklungspolitik und Humanitäre Hilfe deutscher Nichtregierungsorganisationen)	Standpunkt: Verpasste Chancen! Eine Bilanz von vier Jahren Entwicklungspolitik der Bundesregierung	2013 (a)	https://venro.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Dateien/Dateien/Publikationen/Standpunkte/Venro-Standpunkt_Bilanz_Entwicklungspolitik.pdf
VENRO (Verband Entwicklungspolitik und Humanitäre Hilfe deutscher Nichtregierungsorganisationen)	Jahresbericht 2012	2013 (b)	https://venro.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Dateien/Dateien/Publikationen/Jahresberichte/VENRO-Jahresbericht_2012.pdf
VENRO (Verband Entwicklungspolitik und Humanitäre Hilfe deutscher Nichtregierungsorganisationen)	Jahresbericht 2022	2022	https://venro.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Dateien/Dateien/Publikationen/Jahresberichte/VENRO_Jahresbericht_2022_2023.pdf