



Report on policy recommendations

PUBLICATION #50



Funded by the
European Union



SHAPEDEM-EU Publications

Published by Carnegie Foundation Europe (CEF). October 2025.

This publication is part of WP7, led by Justus Liebig University (JLU).

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To cite:

Ezzamouri, Akram, Elena Ventura. Report on Policy Recommendations. SHAPEDEM-EU Publications, 2025.

Design: EURICE GmbH

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Executive Summary

SHAPEDEM-EU sets out to rethink, reshape, and review the European Union's (EU) democracy support policies in its Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods. However, shifting geopolitical dynamics have significantly altered the environment in which the EU operates. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine reinvigorated certain countries' enlargement perspectives and provided additional opportunities for the use of political conditionality in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, conflicts in the Southern Mediterranean weakened the EU's credibility and legitimacy vis-à-vis local actors. These developments call for renewed approaches and engagements with both neighbourhoods. SHAPEDEM-EU's Work Package 7 (Academic Synthesis and Policy Recommendations) translates academic results into actionable and concrete policy recommendations to guide and shape this renewed approach.

SHAPEDEM-EU partners conducted extensive consultations with local actors through a number of mechanisms, including expert interviews, focus groups and citizen juries. These reflect the project's ambition to amplify local voices and embed local expertise in all findings. These activities highlighted current gaps and flaws of EU democracy support policies: EU engagement is described as highly bureaucratic, top-down and geared towards more established international civil society organizations. Additionally, local actors perceive biases in the EU's action and note double standards across the two neighbourhoods.

To address these shortcomings, SHAPEDEM-EU developed policy recommendations anchored in the concept of the Democracy Learning Loop, an innovative framework for discussion that promotes continuous learning for all actors involved. The seven core recommendations outlined in this report aim to provide the foundation for more sustainable and effective EU democracy policies in its Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods.

1 Introduction

During the lifespan of SHAPEDEM-EU, the international environment shaping EU democracy support policies in its Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods underwent profound change. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the East reintroduced the enlargement perspective, while the Israel-Hamas war exacerbated an already volatile situation in the South, weakening the EU's legitimacy vis-à-vis local actors. These emerging dynamics require significant adaptation of EU policies and approaches. In response, SHAPEDEM-EU's Work Package 7 (Academic Synthesis and Policy Recommendations) sets out to develop actionable policy recommendations aimed at renewing democracy support policies and engagement.

Through extensive analysis and consultations with local stakeholders using diverse methods and formats, the SHAPEDEM-EU consortium highlighted flaws in EU democracy support policies vis-à-vis the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood, especially the pre-identified case countries (Armenia, Georgia, Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia, and Ukraine), and formulated a set of recommendations calling for transformative approaches. These measures found that, across both regions, the EU's engagement with civil society has been constrained by limited flexibility and overly bureaucratic procedures. These mechanisms tend to advantage international organisations over local and grassroots initiatives, thus excluding important sectors of society from dialogues and funding.

Civil society, particularly in the Southern neighbourhood, has also pointed to the Union's ongoing credibility crisis. These actors widely criticise what they see as double standards between the EU's swift response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its hesitant stance on the Israel-Hamas war. Such weakness creates room for alternative, at times malign, actors to gain influence. Based on these

findings, SHAPEDEM-EU encourages a decentring of EU democracy support by introducing a novel Democracy Learning Loop (DLL) through which all actors involved would jointly learn how to build up democratic knowledge in and through democratic practices.

This report will first outline the methods adopted by the SHAPEDEM-EU consortium partners to collect information and engage with local voices. It will then present the key findings and provide seven core policy recommendations.

2 Description of Activities

SHAPEDEM-EU's outputs and recommendations are grounded in local perspectives and local agency. The composition of the SHAPEDEM-EU consortium ensures that partners from both the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods lead key analytical work on their respective regions. The policy recommendations were developed following extensive interaction with local partners from both neighbourhoods. The following parts will discuss the methods adopted to ensure that local perspectives are embedded in the final recommendations of the process.

2.1 Focus Groups & Expert Interviews

To ensure meaningful engagement with local communities, including civil society representatives and media professionals, Work Package 2 and Work Package 3 (Democratic Practices & Democracy Support in the Southern Neighbourhood) conducted a series of focus groups and expert interviews. These dialogues provided space for in-depth exploration of local perceptions, experiences and narratives around democracy: its values and practices, as well as the challenges and threats it faces. Open and candid exchanges with non-governmental stakeholders enabled consortium partners to identify gaps in democratic practices and in EU democracy-support policies. Findings from these sessions generated country-specific recommendations, which were subsequently synthesized into comparative and regional insights.

In the Eastern neighbourhood, UoW and NaUKMA organized focus groups and expert interviews online, each dedicated to a different country: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. In the case of Belarus, discussions were carried out with activists and experts in exile, in line with the principle of "do no harm" and in response to prevailing political and security conditions. Overall, 13 focus groups, with 67 participants, took place in this region (Korosteleva and Kudlenko, 2025). In the Southern neighbourhood, the American University of Beirut (AUB) organised eight focus groups on Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia. Due to severe movement restrictions and the heightened security risks in Palestine, researchers utilized Zoom for participants in various parts of the West Bank, while conducting in-person sessions in Jericho and Ramallah when feasible. The conflict prevented engagement with actors in Gaza and led some stakeholders in the West Bank to decline participation. To validate and enrich the initial findings from the focus groups, a hybrid workshop was conducted in June 2025. This brought together SHAPEDEM-EU experts with civil society activists and scholars from Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia and the broader diaspora.

In line with ethical requirements, focus groups were held online with an option to use a nickname and switch off the camera, if participants wanted. All participants agreed to the ethical consent form of the project included in the information sheet, which described the purpose and the context of the research. The form was sent to the potential participant together with an invitation to participate. To make the research more inclusive, the information sheet was translated into local languages. Lastly, all participants were coded in the transcripts before the analysis, and only their codes were used afterwards. Data was anonymised, and all quotes were used without identifying information.

2.2 Citizens Jury

Under Work Package 2 of the SHAPEDEM-EU project (Democratic Practices & Democracy Support in the Eastern Neighbourhood), the consortium partners University of Warwick (UoW) and National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NaUKMA) organised two citizen juries in Ukraine in May 2025. The juries brought together residents of small towns (with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants) and rural communities in order to gain insights beyond the country's capital (Korosteleva and Kudlenko, 2025). Each jury met twice over a two-week period and included 12 participants representing diverse ages, genders, educational levels, professions and regions of Ukraine (East-South, Centre-North, and West under government control). In total, 24 citizens took part, with an equal gender balance achieved. The first meetings focused on civic engagement and democratic practices at the local level from a theoretical point of view, while the second round was dedicated to exploring ways to enhance meaningful participation and the effectiveness of civic engagement instruments vis-à-vis the EU (Korosteleva and Kudlenko, 2025).

Similarly to the focus group, all participants in citizens' juries agreed to the ethical consent form of the project included in the information sheet, which described the purpose and the context of the research. To make the research more inclusive, the information sheet was translated into local languages.

2.3 Democracy Roundtables

Held in Brussels from June 2023 to June 2025, the six Democracy Roundtables gathered around 30 participants from civil society, academia, think tanks, and EU and national representatives. This format aimed at collecting feedback on SHAPEDEM-EU's outputs and fostering a strong network of democracy professionals. Selected consortium representatives attended the roundtables, ensuring the project's findings were prominently featured in the dialogue. Most sessions were moderated by Richard Youngs from Carnegie Europe Foundation (CEF), except for the roundtable on Armenia, which was led by Thomas de Waal (CEF), given his deeper expertise on the South Caucasus. The consortium moderators introduced the SHAPEDEM-EU project and concepts, such as the democracy learning loop, at the outset and concluded each roundtable with a summary that reinforced the project's goals and focus on democracy support policies. The roundtables were held under Chatham House rules and in respect of the "do no harm" principle. In line with the project's objective of ensuring balanced geographic representation, three of the roundtables focused on issues pertinent to the Eastern neighbourhood, and the other three concentrated on the Southern neighbourhood. The roundtables supported the co-creation of policy recommendations and ensured consistent feedback on SHAPEDEM-EU results.

Full List of Democracy Roundtable	
Roundtable #1	EU's enlargement in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine
Roundtable #2	Democracy and geopolitics in the Southern Neighbourhood: between principles and pragmatism
Roundtable #3	Democracy and EU enlargement after elections in Georgia and Moldova
Roundtable #4	EU's renewed approach to the Southern Neighbourhood in face of legitimacy crises
Roundtable #5	Navigating new realities: Armenia's democracy and European journey
Roundtable #6	EU democracy support policy amidst the New Pact for the Mediterranean

2.4 New Democratic Voices Retreats

The New Democratic Voices Retreat, held in Brussels in April 2024 and June 2025, gathered emerging civil society voices from both neighbourhoods together with EU policymakers. Across two separate retreats, on the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods respectively, CEF identified key civil society representatives with strong grassroots engagement in their respective countries who could provide nuanced perspectives and lived experiences. This selection mechanism emphasised the participation of representatives from new forms of social movements – such as youth and digital movements. As a result, most of the participants travelled from the neighbourhoods – although, in certain cases of conflict, diaspora members had to be engaged e.g. Lebanon, Palestine and Ukraine. The retreats were held under Chatham House rules and in respect of the “do no harm” principle.

The two retreats were instrumental for CEF to gather direct feedback on EU policies and initiatives, together with suggestions for alternative ways of approaching the neighbourhoods. They played a key role in shaping the project’s recommendations, both on specific EU tools, such as the Action Plan on Human Rights & Democracy and the Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf (DG MENA)’s New Pact for the Mediterranean, and on broader guidance for the two neighbourhoods. Notably, these insights were directly shared with the EU policymakers present at the retreats, enabling them to integrate the findings into their daily decision-making.

2.5 Living Lab

SHAPEDEM-EU organized three Living Labs events, two online and one in-person. Two separate online Living Labs were held on each of the neighbourhoods in May and July 2024. The event on the Eastern neighbourhood brought together civil society representatives from Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine, along with European stakeholders. The European stakeholders primarily involved participants from international and regional donor organisations. The event took place under Chatham House Rules and with the verbal consent of the participating 15 individuals. The two-hour digital Living Lab event was conducted in concert by the JLU, CEF, EaP CSF and KADEM. While the findings of the previous phase were presented, the activities were dedicated to finding common concepts for democracy support based on shared experiences.

The second Living Lab event on 24 July 2024 included 10 individuals from Tunisia alongside European representatives, albeit not from EU institutions. Due to the ongoing conflict and safety concerns, the participation of individuals from Palestine and Lebanon was not possible. The outcome of this Living Lab event, as a consequence, was much more focused on the insights gained from democracy support concepts in Tunisia, although the participants were also invited to draw on their own professional experiences in Palestine and Lebanon.

The in-person lab took place in Istanbul, Türkiye, to ensure ease of access for participants from the Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods, both related to travel arrangements as well as visa conditions. The in-person event included 11 individuals from both neighbourhoods (1 individual each from Ukraine, Armenia and Lebanon (online); 2 individuals each from Palestine, Georgia Tunisia) as well as two participants from European donor organisations. In line with ethical concerns, all living lab participants received a consent form ahead of their participation. The consent form outlined participants’ specific roles, data collection and processing, confidentiality, risks, and benefits. All conversations took place under Chatham House rules, and participants were anonymised.

The diversity of participants, both in terms of working backgrounds, nationalities, and time of experience in the field of democracy support, produced an environment ripe for collecting knowledge

about past and present policies. Moreover, by bringing individuals from both neighbourhoods together, the event fostered a process of mutual learning and best practices exchanges. The three-day event featured different sessions dedicated to informing the participants about SHAPEDEM-EU concepts, including the project's approach and vocabulary for EU democracy support, sharing interim findings with those individuals who had not participated in Phase 3, as well as co-productive activities used to generate policy insights.

Unlike conventional policy review mechanisms, the Living Lab provides a more inclusive, dynamic and ultimately effective pathway for strengthening democratic practices in the EU's Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods (Schöppner and Nasibov, 2025). Throughout the living lab exercise, participants from both the neighbourhood and from Brussels came together with the aim of unpacking EU democracy support practices and co-creating policy recommendations. Co-creation encouraged a dynamic, iterative learning process. Instead of static, one-off assessments, the Living Lab enabled continuous policy co-review, allowing for ongoing adaptation and innovation (Schöppner and Nasibov, 2025). Institutionalising this approach would ensure EU policies are not only more relevant and effective, but also more legitimate in the eyes of those they aim to support. The SHAPEDEM-EU experience demonstrates the potential of the Living Lab to move beyond a pilot project and become a permanent feature of the EU's policy toolbox.

2. Conceptual basis: the Democracy Learning Loop

Against the backdrop of widespread democratic backsliding and loss of confidence in the democratic system, SHAPEDEM-EU calls for a decentring of EU democracy support by introducing a novel Democracy Learning Loop (DLL) through which all actors involved would jointly learn how to build up democratic knowledge in and through democratic practices. Work Package 1 (Conceptualising Democracy & Democracy Support in Times of Multi-Layered Contestation) shows that the EU's democracy support in its neighbourhood has been only partially successful, also because of a persistent process of 'non-learning' (Achraimer and Pace, 2024). Rather than adapting to lessons from past failures, the EU often continues to reproduce what WP1 calls *democracy support malpractices* (Achraimer and Pace, 2024).

They conceptualise EU democracy support as practices carried out by a *community of insiders*—the ultimate decision-makers within EU institutions and their allies (NGOs, implementation agencies, think tanks, etc.). These insiders operate within a wider web of Communities of Practice (CoPs) that influence or contest their work. WP1 identifies three such groups: first, reform-oriented actors who seek to replace EU malpractices with more effective approaches; second, resistant actors who oppose EU democracy support because they reject democratisation in the neighbourhood or in specific countries; and third, cross-policy actors who pursue EU priorities in areas such as energy, migration, security and trade, often in ways that contradict or undermine democracy support (Achraimer and Pace, 2024). Through the DLL, SHAPEDEM-EU proposes that these diverse actors enter into a joint learning process, making democracy support more reflexive, adaptive and effective.

3 Key Findings

3.1 Overall EU Democracy Support Policies

According to Work Package 4 (EU Democracy Support & Democratic Practices in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood) findings, EU democracy support cannot be reduced to a single model; rather, it shifts between projecting norms and accommodating local or geopolitical constraints (Ezzamouri, 2025). The EU's own commitment to democracy, understood in terms of social

embeddedness, empowerment and accountability, was repeatedly tested and often compromised to prioritize security and stability concerns. Yet, at times, it was adjusted in ways that suggested possibilities for reflexive learning (Ezzamouri, 2025).

The European Union has placed democracy at the heart of its foreign policy, reflecting its normative identity as a promoter of human rights, the rule of law and good governance. However, both academic research and policy practice increasingly indicate that EU democracy support has evolved over time from a primarily normative agenda to one often shaped by geopolitical considerations (Balfour 2024). Issues such as security, energy, migration and regional stability have frequently taken precedence over democratic principles.

This shift reflects broader tensions within the EU as a “multilevel polity” (Hooghe, Marks and Marks 2001), where central institutions, member states, civil society and local actors interact in ways that can both enable and constrain democracy support. Discursive contestation within the EU has been particularly influential in shaping this trajectory. As SHAPEDEM-EU research on EU narratives conducted within Work Package 4 has shown, debates and contestations among EU stakeholders reveal persistent gaps between rhetorical commitments to democracy and democracy support and their translation into policy practice. This highlights the limits of the EU as a coherent and learning-capable actor.

A cross-case analysis of the Union’s neighbourhood policies reveals fragmented democratic practices: moments of responsiveness and local embeddedness alternate with elite-focused engagement and securitisation, producing outcomes shaped by both internal tensions within the EU and the external contexts in which it operates (Ezzamouri, 2025). This dynamic becomes most apparent when the EU’s rhetoric is examined alongside its actions due to the significant gap between discourse and practice in the realm of EU democracy support.

2.3. Influence of non-EU External Actors

WP6 (Non-EU External Actors: Partners, Competitors, or Adversaries) further examined the influence of non-EU external actors in the neighbourhood, noting that the binary of ‘democracy promoters’ versus ‘autocracy supporters’ does not reflect how actors actually operate. Non-EU players shift tactics across issues, contexts and moments due to their strategic interests, rather than identity labels or political alignment (Bourekba & Abrami, 2025). Therefore, it is crucial to understand that, regardless of their democratic credentials, the actions of non-EU actors can result in authoritarian enabling and/or democracy prevention – even in the absence of direct and intentional authoritarian collaboration (Bourekba & Abrami, 2025).

The EU’s current credibility crisis, especially following what many in the region read as double standards between the EU’s response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its hesitant stance on Gaza, leaves a vacuum for alternatives to spread. “Russia offers security justifications, China markets an authoritarian modernisation pathway that emphasises growth, order, and socio-economic rights over liberal political guarantees, while Gulf monarchies champion stability-first governance that sidelines political pluralism” (Bourekba & Abrami, 2025).

2.4. Eastern Neighbourhood

Across focus groups, participants voiced criticism of the EU’s limited flexibility and excessive bureaucratic procedures in its engagement with local civil society. Similar concerns were raised during the New Democratic Voices Retreat, where participants expressed frustration at the administrative burden imposed by the EU. They recommended simplifying and streamlining procedures so as not to

overwhelm local organizations, which often lack the resources, knowledge, or skills to meet such demanding requirements.

Urban and capital-based civil society actors, which are relatively better trained in EU themes of democracy support, have, thus, gained an upper hand in relation to civil society actors in rural or remote areas. Living lab participants highlighted that such top-down thematic structuring, with its own bureaucratic terminology, has suppressed the chances for local democratic knowledge to be shaped or articulated. The European Endowment for Democracy (EED) was named as an example of better practices in terms of funding civil society. The EED provides application forms in local languages and delivers flexible funding, adhering to the principles of ‘do no harm’.

Monitoring and evaluation criteria and procedures adopted by the EU were also criticized as being removed from the local knowledge and context. To address this gap, participants from focus groups in the Eastern neighbourhood highlighted the need to include local contextualization and expertise, including the involvement of local experts, in designing, planning, implementing and assessing democracy support strategies.

2.5. Southern Neighbourhood

Work Package 3 also noted a widespread perception of the EU's engagement with Southern partners as “technical”, “top-down”, and “activity-driven”, failing to address the deep-seated structural causes of democratic deficits, such as authoritarianism, elite capture, and occupation (Makdisi, Mouwad & Francis, 2025). This has cultivated widespread discontent, which manifests differently in each context: as *cynicism* in Lebanon, where the EU is seen as propping up a failing status quo; as *disillusionment* in Tunisia, where early post-revolution optimism has dissolved in the face of the EU's muted response to democratic backsliding; and as *anger* in Palestine, where the EU is widely perceived as complicit in human rights and humanitarian law violations taking place (Makdisi, Mouwad & Francis, 2025).

WP3 found three mechanisms generally driving this disconnect. First, current mechanisms for funding and conditionality targeting non-governmental organisations (NGOs) foster dependency and the commodification of social issues. Donor agendas tend to override community needs, with conditionality ranging from implicit priority-setting, in cases such as Lebanon, Tunisia, to explicit punitive measures, e.g. anti-terror clauses in Palestine. Combined, these significantly undermine local agency (Makdisi, Mouwad & Francis, 2025). Second, direct engagement is blocked by informal, one-sided communication and layers of gatekeepers, i.e. implementing CSOs, political elites and opaque funding processes, which exclude grassroots and marginalized actors (Makdisi, Mouwad & Francis, 2025). Third, local contestation, whether feedback or rejecting funds, rarely shifts EU practices, forcing actors into informal channels. Geopolitical crises like Gaza and the Syrian refugee response become “epiphanic moments,” exposing EU double standards and eroding its credibility (Makdisi, Mouwad & Francis, 2025).

During focus group discussions, NGO representatives questioned the participatory nature of EU engagement, stating the EU primarily deals with organizations linked to the political elite for efficiency, leveraging the traditional parties' grasp over territory and institutions. WP3 findings further show that interactions with donors are shaped by reliance on EU-driven agendas rather than community-centric approaches. This led to local pushback and perceptions of misalignment. For instance, to secure EU funding, local actors are compelled to use the EU's preferred terminology and frameworks rather than their own language of struggle.

3. Policy Recommendations

Based on these findings, the SHAPEDEM-EU consortium developed the following recommendations to foster renewed EU democracy support policies:

- 1. Institutionalize a democracy learning loop process:** this methodology fosters participation, transforms stakeholders from passive informants into active co-creators, and ensures that participants' perspectives shape every stage - from agenda-setting to final analysis. This ensures that dialogue is not only vertical, between the EU and its neighbours, but also horizontal, among diverse local actors. In doing so, it rebalances power dynamics and cultivates an ecosystem of mutual respect, trust, and shared ownership.
- 2. Invest in learning and resilience through education:** Sustainable democracy requires more than institutions; it needs citizens who are equipped to participate and resist domestic or external authoritarian pressures. Civic education, media literacy and support for independent media are crucial here. Supporting both formal and informal education will help cultivate the skills, values and resilience that democratic practice relies on.
- 3. Put local voices, priorities and conceptions of democracy at the centre:** EU democracy support has too often flowed through national elites or established NGOs, leaving out the grassroots actors where much of democratic life actually happens. The EU should create safe, open and periodic spaces where it can systematically listen to the local experiences, and adapt programmes accordingly to make support more relevant, less elitist and closer to everyday democratic practices.
- 4. Protect civic space and support civil society under pressure:** Given trends of democratic backsliding in the neighbourhoods, EU Delegations should systematically monitor restrictions on CSOs and grassroots activists, ensuring that EU aid is explicitly linked to the protection of civic space. The EU should also fund legal defence mechanisms and provide targeted support to civil society actors facing repression or harassment. At the same time, care must be taken to avoid prescriptive measures that could limit the autonomy or operational space of local CSOs, as observed in Palestine, ensuring that support strengthens rather than constrains local democratic agency.
- 5. Break down barriers to funding and support:** Many local stakeholders from the neighbourhoods struggle to access EU support because procedures are too complex and tailored to big and more structured organisations. This fuels dependency and reinforces gatekeeping by well-connected intermediaries. To counter this, the EU should design more flexible forms of support that small organisations can actually use, whether through micro-grants, rapid-response aid or multi-year core funding that allows organisations to plan ahead their work. Making funding accessible to a wider range of civil society actors in the neighbourhoods will broaden ownership of democracy support and reduce the perception that it serves only a select few.
- 6. Make feedback and contestation part of the process:** Criticism, protest and disagreement are signs of democratic vitality, not threats to stability. Yet too often the EU treats contestation as noise to be managed rather than insights or claims to be acted on. Embedding regular feedback mechanisms (e.g. with a dedicated coordinating democracy learning unit), responding publicly to civic concerns, and being willing to adapt policies would turn critique into a source of democratic development. By normalising reflexivity and showing that learning is mutual, the EU can model the very democratic practices it seeks to support.

- 7. Align democracy support with all EU foreign policies:** The EU’s credibility suffers when democracy promotion is undermined by competing priorities. To change this, democracy should not be treated as a separate policy area but as a guiding principle across foreign policies. This means ensuring that initiatives in these areas do not contradict democratic goals; a clearer alignment would eventually strengthen the EU’s image as a consistent and trustworthy actor.

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