

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST AUTOCRATISATION IN THE EUROPEAN NEIGHBOURHOOD

REPORT



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Innovative Practices in the Fight against Autocratisation in the European Neighbourhood Report

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Introduction

In the past decade, the European Neighbourhood has witnessed increasing political polarization, democratic backsliding, and the strengthening of hybrid and authoritarian governance. Autocratisation in the region has emerged from ongoing struggles over legitimacy, identity, sovereignty, and political authority which have also triggered institutional decay or executive overreach. These dynamics are characterized by growing dissensus, defined here according to the typology established in the Red Spinel Project (see Coman and Brack, 2025). Rather than being episodic, *dissensus* has become a central feature of political life in the Neighbourhood, shaping the contestation, co-optation, and resistance of reforms.

Concurrently, the European Union has broadened and diversified its engagement to address these developments. Utilizing policy instruments within the European Neighbourhood Policy, the EU has aimed to reinforce democratic resilience while adapting to more restrictive political environments. However, this adaptation has occurred amid a persistent tension between normative commitments to liberal democratic values and operational priorities such as stability, security, and geopolitical influence.

This report analyzes how EU instruments fare against these tendencies, but also how they confront, manage, and at times reproduce dissensus within autocratising contexts. It demonstrates that, although many initiatives exhibit innovation in both design and societal reach, they often circumvent rather than address the fundamental political conflicts that shape power in the Neighbourhood. Through sectoral case studies on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), information integrity, human rights, and anti-corruption, the report traces how dissensus functions simultaneously as a target of governance, a resource for authoritarian adaptation, and a potential catalyst for democratic renewal. Recognizing this ambivalent role of dissensus is crucial for evaluating both the limitations and prospects of EU engagement in an increasingly contested political landscape of the Neighbourhood.

1. Autocratization Trends and Dynamics in the EU Neighbourhood Post-2020

(Claudia Bădulescu & Luca Tomini, ULB)

The EU's surrounding regions have increasingly reflected global autocratization dynamics since 2020, becoming integral to what is often termed the global "third wave of autocratization"¹. This phenomenon, characterised by widespread democratic backsliding, institutional erosion, and the rise of authoritarian governance, has notably intensified worldwide over the last decade. According to V-Dem Institute data, in 2021 alone, 33 countries worldwide, home to approximately 36% of the world's population, experienced significant democratic declines. This global trend underscores broader geopolitical, socio-economic, and institutional vulnerabilities that now distinctly characterise the EU neighbourhood.

One overarching driving factor behind autocratization across the EU neighbourhood is the shifting geopolitical landscape, prominently influenced by major authoritarian powers such as Russia and China, as well as increasingly assertive regional actors like Turkey. Russia's domestic authoritarian consolidation and its aggressive foreign policy have substantially shaped autocratic tendencies among its neighbours. The Kremlin's intensifying repression domestically, particularly after its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, created ripple effects, legitimising similar measures under national security pretexts among neighbouring states. Belarus, highly dependent on Russian political and security support, illustrates this vividly. Since the contested 2020 presidential elections, President Alexander Lukashenka's regime has sharply intensified internal repression, with over 1,430 political prisoners detained by early 2024². Belarus's transition from electoral autocracy to consolidated authoritarianism was expedited by Russian support, including the instrumentalisation of Belarusian territory for Russia's invasion of Ukraine³. Consequently, Belarusian sovereignty has eroded, highlighting autocratization as both internally driven and externally reinforced. Azerbaijan mirrors Belarus in its autocratic consolidation, though largely driven by domestic hereditary authoritarianism under President Ilham Aliyev. Its political system, devoid of meaningful electoral competition, exhibits extreme repression against civil society and media. The aggressive 2020 military conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh, completed in 2023, underscores the destabilising potential of

¹ Lührmann, Anna, and Staffan I. Lindberg. "A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?" *Democratization*, 26 (7), 2019, pp. 1095–1113.

² Voice of Belarus. "Political Prisoners of Belarus in 2023: Infographics." *Voice of Belarus*, 2023. <https://www.voiceofbelarus.org/article/political-prisoners-of-belarus-in-2023-infographics/>

³ Freedom House. "A Region Reordered by Autocracy and Democracy." *Nations in Transit 2024*, 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2024/region-reordered-autocracy-and-democracy>

entrenched autocratic regimes, demonstrating that autocratization can escalate into regional conflict and humanitarian crises.

Conversely, Ukraine and Moldova exemplify resilience, which is partially attributable to external democratic incentives, such as EU integration. Ukraine's democratic persistence amidst Russia's invasion has featured robust judicial and anti-corruption reforms, as evidenced by improvements in Freedom House's Nations in Transit scores in 2023. Moldova similarly benefits from pro-EU political dynamics, which modestly enhance democratic governance despite ongoing corruption and polarisation. Nevertheless, these nations face inherent tensions: Ukraine's democratic governance operates under martial law restrictions, exemplifying the delicate balance between democratic principles and national security during conflict. Georgia presents a nuanced intermediary case. While demonstrating autocratization indicators since 2018, including attempts to impose restrictive "foreign agent" laws in 2023, societal mobilisation and international pressures have tempered full authoritarian regression⁴. Georgian civil society's successful resistance to repressive legislation highlights a crucial factor mitigating democratic erosion—vibrant and mobilised civic engagement. Armenia similarly underscores democratic vulnerability amid external pressures. Despite the democratic breakthroughs following its 2018 Velvet Revolution, Armenia's governance has faced severe strains from Azerbaijan's aggressive actions in Nagorno-Karabakh. While maintaining competitive elections, Armenia exemplifies how existential security threats can constrain democratic consolidation, emphasising external geopolitical dynamics as significant autocratization factors.

In the Southern Neighbourhood, the post-Arab Spring era has markedly regressed toward authoritarianism. Tunisia, previously celebrated as a democratic beacon after 2011, has undergone dramatic democratic erosion since President Kaïs Saïed's authoritarian measures in 2021. Saïed's dismantling of parliamentary institutions, constitutional consolidation of executive power, and severely restricted elections underscore the fragility of democratic gains, challenging assumptions about linear democratisation paths post-Arab Spring⁵. Egypt further illustrates entrenched authoritarian stability. Under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's rule, repression intensified post-2020, evidenced by approximately 65,000 political detainees and stringent limitations on civil society and media⁶.

⁴ Freedom House. "A Region Reordered by Autocracy and Democracy." *Nations in Transit 2024*, 2024.

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2024/region-reordered-autocracy-and-democracy>

⁵ <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/lost-in-transition-the-traps-of-authoritarian-nostalgia-in-tunisia/>

⁶ Freedom House. "Egypt." *Freedom in the World 2025*, 2025. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/egypt/freedom-world/2025>

Despite international scrutiny over human rights violations, the regime maintains stability through coercive measures justified by national security narratives, highlighting the complex interplay between authoritarian governance, international tolerances of repression, and domestic stability claims. Algeria represents authoritarian resilience following mass protests in 2019. The military-backed regime effectively suppressed democratic aspirations through strategic repression and low-turnout referendums, solidifying authoritarian control post-2020. This underlying repression underscores the inherent challenges popular movements face against deeply entrenched authoritarian establishments, particularly when faced with regime-controlled security apparatuses and co-opted political structures. Morocco and Jordan exemplify stable 'liberalised autocracies', managing dissent through selective reforms without substantive democratisation⁷. Regular elections remain carefully controlled to prevent meaningful political competition, maintaining monarchical authority and stability. Their governance model reflects a calculated strategy that balances limited pluralism with firm authoritarian control, thereby avoiding substantial democratic transitions.

In stark contrast, Libya and Syria epitomise governance collapse and extreme authoritarianism, respectively. Libya's persistent institutional fragmentation since 2014, amid ongoing factional conflict, renders democratic governance impossible. Syria under President Bashar al-Assad epitomised brutal authoritarianism sustained through violent suppression, lacking any genuine political pluralism or institutional checks, with one of the lowest global freedom scores. In December 2024, the Assad regime suddenly collapsed under the military offensive led by the Islamist militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), further exacerbating the lack of any accountable governance⁸. Lebanon's governance trajectory underscores how democratic fragility and systemic corruption can erode institutional effectiveness, risking increased authoritarian influences without overt regime change⁹. Conversely, Israel represents an established democracy encountering internal pressures, exemplified by controversial judicial reforms provoking substantial domestic protests since 2022. This scenario highlights the vulnerability of democracy even within consolidated democratic systems, reflecting broader global illiberal pressures.

⁷ Freedom House. "Countries and Territories." *Freedom House Scores*, 2025.

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/scores>

⁸ Freedom House. "Syria." *Freedom in the World 2025*, 2025. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2025>

⁹ Freedom House. "Lebanon." *Freedom in the World 2024*, 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/lebanon/freedom-world/2024>

In the Western Balkans and Turkey, democratic backsliding is prominently driven by both domestic and external factors, with Serbia and Turkey serving as notable examples. Serbia's autocratization under President Aleksandar Vučić, which intensified significantly after 2020, reflects a systematic undermining of democratic norms through media control, electoral manipulation, and judicial capture. Similarly, Turkey's shift to electoral autocracy under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan post-2017 exemplifies severe democratic regression, with judicial weaponisation against political opposition and media suppression, effectively freezing EU accession negotiations¹⁰. Bosnia and Herzegovina exhibits democratic stagnation and deterioration, particularly within Republika Srpska, where repressive legislation severely restricts civil liberties¹¹. Ethnic divisions and systemic corruption further exacerbate governance inefficiencies, inhibiting democratic progress. North Macedonia's initial democratic momentum post-2017 has similarly stalled, undermined by persistent corruption and political polarisation¹². Montenegro and Albania display stability, yet they experience persistent governance weaknesses, including state capture and endemic corruption, reflecting democratic stagnation rather than overt authoritarian regression. Kosovo represents cautious democratic optimism, highlighted by recent peaceful power transitions and an active civil society¹³. However, unresolved conflicts with Serbia continue to pose significant democratic risks, particularly regarding ethnic tensions and the prioritisation of national security over liberal reforms.

Overall, the post-2020 autocratization in the EU neighbourhood reflects broader trends of democratic erosion driven by geopolitical tensions, internal governance weaknesses, economic vulnerabilities, and societal polarisation. Key autocratization mechanisms across regions include institutional capture, judicial politicisation, media suppression, and restrictions on civil society. These trends are exacerbated by weakened international democratic norms and the declining leverage of democratic actors, such as the EU, whose enlargement incentives and democratic conditionalities have become less effective against emboldened authoritarian tendencies. Thus, addressing these autocratization trends requires a strategic recalibration of

¹⁰ Esen, Berk, and Sebnem Gumuscu. "After Crackdown, Is Turkey an Autocracy?" *Journal of Democracy Online Exclusive*, March 2025. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/after-crackdown-is-turkey-an-autocracy/>

¹¹ Kanlić, Edo, and Paola Petrić. "Deteriorating State Crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, March 19, 2025. <https://www.boell.de/en/2025/03/19/deteriorating-state-crisis-bosnia-and-herzegovina>

¹² Couteau, Benjamin, et al. "North Macedonia's EU Path: Challenges and Opportunities in 2025." *Clingendael Policy Brief*, December 2024. https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/BP_North_Macedonia_Couteau.pdf

¹³ Freedom House. "Kosovo." *Nations in Transit 2024*, 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kosovo/nations-transit/2024>

EU policies, bolstering civil society resilience, reinforcing democratic conditionalities, and promoting international cooperation to counteract authoritarian momentum before it solidifies into enduring authoritarian regimes. The following section provides a detailed overview of the EU's historical and current instruments and strategies to promote democracy and counter autocratization in its neighbourhood, with particular emphasis on developments since 2020.

2. The European Union's Response to Autocratisation in the EU Neighbourhood

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The EU has long identified the promotion of liberal democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in its neighbourhood as a strategic objective. Over the decades, it has developed a comprehensive toolbox – from political agreements and financial instruments to dialogues and sanctions – to support democratic reforms and resist autocratization in neighbouring countries. This section provides an overview of the EU's historical and current response to autocratization in the European Neighbourhood, with a focus on the post-2020 period.

3.1 Historical and Evolving EU Response to Autocratization

The period after 2020 has seen the EU update its democracy support approach in light of democratic backsliding in the neighbourhood and global geopolitical shifts. In March 2020 – even before some dramatic setbacks – the Commission and EEAS proposed a new Joint Communication "Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that Delivers for All." This strategy, endorsed by EU Council conclusions, set "resilience" as the overarching framework and defined five long-term priorities, one of which explicitly focused on "*good governance, rule of law, and security*"¹⁴. At the heart of this was a continued commitment to democracy support: High Representative Josep Borrell noted in 2021 that "*promoting democracy, good governance and the rule of law*" would remain central, stating that "*we cannot be an island of democracy in a world of autocracies*"¹⁵. In mid-2021, the EU unveiled a "Renewed Agenda for the Eastern Partnership: Recovery, Resilience and Reform," backed by a €2.3 billion Economic and Investment Plan (potentially mobilising €17 billion)¹⁶. This agenda explicitly includes strengthening democratic institutions as a pillar, alongside economic recovery and green/digital transitions. It also promises additional support

¹⁴ EU Monitor. (n.d.). *Eastern Partnership - Policy* (Publication ID: 9353000). <https://www.eumonitor.nl/9353000/1/j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vlk5fyrl1bmx>

¹⁵ Dumoulin, Marie, Marlene Marx, Piotr Buras, and Tefta Kelmendi. "The interest of values: The EU's democracy promotion in the Western Balkans and the eastern neighbourhood." *re-Engage*, July 31, 2024. <https://re-engaging.eu/the-interest-of-values-the-eus-democracy-promotion-in-the-western-balkans-and-the-eastern-neighbourhood/>

¹⁶ EU Monitor. (n.d.). *Eastern Partnership - Policy* (Publication ID: 9353000). <https://www.eumonitor.nl/9353000/1/j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vlk5fyrl1bmx>

to civil society and independent media, and even earmarks support for a "*future democratic Belarus*" as part of the Eastern Partnership framework. Similarly, in the Southern Neighbourhood, the EU adopted a Joint Communication in 2021 on a "*Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood – A New Agenda for the Mediterranean*." This strategy, along with its accompanying Investment Plan, aims to relaunch cooperation with North African and Middle Eastern neighbours, with a primary focus on governance and the rule of law, as well as socio-economic development.

The 'more for more, less for less' principle—greater EU support for stronger reforms and reduced engagement for backsliding—has guided the ENP since 2011. Association Agreements (AAs) and DCFTAs anchor reforms through integration, embedding democratic clauses and reform agendas. They can drive progress but also create tensions: while offering clear incentives, they sometimes deepen structural inequalities or are manipulated by elites. This dual outcome is a recurring theme in later analysis.

2.2 Key EU Instruments and Initiatives to Promote Democracy

The EU employs a wide array of instruments – legal agreements, financial tools, policy conditionality, and support programs – to encourage liberal democratic governance in neighbouring countries. These instruments are designed to leverage the EU's attractive market and financial resources in exchange for reforms, and to directly support pro-democracy actors on the ground. Below we outline the most important tools and how they function to promote democratic reforms, human rights, and rule of law in the European Neighbourhood.

Association Agreements and DCFTAs: Anchoring Reforms through Integration

Besides legal alignment, AAs explicitly incorporate democratic conditionality clauses. A serious breach of democratic principles or human rights by the partner can lead to suspension of certain agreement benefits. In practice, the EU has been cautious in invoking suspension (preferring engagement), but the clause itself serves as a deterrent against egregious backsliding. Furthermore, the process of qualifying for perks like visa-free travel to the EU – often offered alongside AAs – has been a powerful incentive for democratisation. For example, the EU's visa liberalisation dialogues with Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine set strict benchmarks in areas such as anti-corruption, judicial reform, and human rights protections. Meeting these criteria not only enabled easier people-to-people contacts but also directly strengthened rule of law institutions. In 2014, Moldova, and in 2017, Georgia and Ukraine achieved visa-free access

after implementing the required reforms. This success underscored how integration incentives can catalyse democratic reforms. In short, AAs and DCFTAs function as 'integration as a means of democratisation' – they anchor countries on an EU-led reform path, provide detailed blueprints for good governance, and reward compliance with tangible benefits, including closer economic and societal ties to Europe.

European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) and NDICI-Global Europe: Financial Support and Conditionality

The European Neighbourhood Instrument's programmes encompass a wide range of democracy-building activities, including strengthening parliaments, judicial reform assistance, electoral observation missions, public administration reform, decentralisation support to empower local governments, and anti-corruption initiatives. Under NDICI, such programs continue, now integrated with global thematic lines. Notably, civil society development is a major focus; the EU provides direct grants and capacity-building support to NGOs, human rights defenders, youth groups, and independent media. Even in very restrictive environments, the EU attempts to maintain some support through its delegations or flexible funds (often channelled via international organisations or the European Endowment for Democracy). For example, after Belarus's crackdown in 2020, the EU reallocated a substantial sum of planned aid away from the state and towards civil society and humanitarian needs: €53 million earmarked initially for Belarusian government programs was swiftly rerouted to support NGOs, independent media, victims of regime repression, and COVID-19 relief via civil society¹⁷. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced this move days after Belarus's fraudulent election, signalling that no EU funds would bolster an illegitimate regime but instead would "go directly to the people" fighting for democracy.

In addition, the EU has deployed Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) packages – conditional loans and grants to stabilise economies – in ways that reinforce democracy and good governance. These MFA programs (often coordinated with IMF reforms) typically include policy conditions, such as improving anti-corruption frameworks or enhancing central bank independence. Countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, Jordan, and Tunisia have all benefited from EU MFA in recent years, with tranches sometimes frozen until reform benchmarks

¹⁷ Reuters. "EU executive to reroute 53 million euros to help civil society, fight against COVID in Belarus." August 19, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-vonderleyen/eu-executive-to-reroute-53-million-euros-to-help-civil-society-fight-against-covid-in-belarus-idUSKCN25F1PR>

(including governance measures) are fulfilled. MFA thus complements the grant-based ENI/NDICI by giving the EU leverage at the highest policy levels.

Political Dialogue, Conditionality and Diplomacy

Alongside material incentives, the EU employs political dialogue and diplomacy as tools to promote democratic reforms. Under the ENP framework, the EU holds regular Association Councils/Committees or Cooperation Councils with each partner, where the EU raises concerns about governance and human rights. Specialised Human Rights Dialogues are conducted annually with many countries, providing a forum to discuss political prisoners, media freedom, and legal changes. While these dialogues are often conducted behind closed doors and their impact can be difficult to measure, they form part of the EU's engagement strategy – signalling to governments that relations cannot deepen without addressing democratic concerns. Since 2011, the ENP's "more for more" approach has made these exchanges more targeted: the EU explicitly links progress in the political dialogue to benefits, such as financial packages or trade concessions. For example, Morocco and Jordan received advanced status partnerships in part by committing (on paper) to reform processes; conversely, Azerbaijan's failure to improve its human rights record meant its talks for a new agreement with the EU progressed slowly and lacked the broad scope of an Association Agreement. EU officials regularly remind partners that an "enabling environment for civil society and improvement of fundamental freedoms" is critical for closer cooperation. This conditional diplomatic messaging was evident in EU dealings with Azerbaijan: even as the EU sought a new partnership agreement for strategic reasons, statements by the EU Commission and the External Action Service noted that progress must include easing constraints on civil society and the media.

At times, the EU has taken on a direct mediating role in neighbourhood political crises – an innovative diplomatic instrument to resolve standoffs that threaten democracy. A notable case was Georgia in 2021, when a dispute over alleged election fraud and the jailing of an opposition leader led to a parliamentary boycott. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, personally engaged in shuttle diplomacy, appointing a special envoy and presenting a compromise roadmap. This EU-mediated agreement (April 19, 2021) included commitments to electoral and judicial reforms and an amnesty for protest-related offenses. Michel hailed the deal as *"the starting point for... consolidating Georgia's democracy"* and publicly tied Georgia's Euro-Atlantic future to upholding the agreement¹⁸. Although the

¹⁸ Reuters. "EU's Michel says he has brokered deal to end crisis in Georgia." April 19, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eus-michel-says-he-has-brokered-deal-end-crisis-georgia-2021-04-19/>

agreement later unravelled, the EU's unprecedented intervention demonstrated a willingness to use diplomatic leverage to forestall a democratic breakdown. The EU has also increased its mediation in conflict-related contexts (which, while primarily about peace, also aim to create conditions for accountable governance). For instance, the EU appointed a Special Representative to facilitate dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, and another Special Representative for the South Caucasus, who has convened leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan in EU-sponsored peace talks. Successful conflict resolution is seen by the EU as linked to democratic development – as stable peace can weaken authoritarian justifications and open space for civil society. In Belarus, although direct mediation with the regime was not feasible after 2020, the EU diplomatically engaged with the Belarusian democratic opposition in exile. EU foreign ministers received exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and even addressed the European Parliament, a form of political recognition and moral support to democratic forces. The EU and its member states established an "International Contact Group" on Belarus to coordinate pressure on the regime and support for civil society, presenting a diplomatic front against autocratization.

A new diplomatic tool introduced in late 2020 is the EU's Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, sometimes dubbed the "European Magnitsky Act". This framework allows the EU to impose asset freezes and visa bans on individuals and entities responsible for serious human rights violations worldwide. It has been used to sanction officials from several neighbourhood countries for abuses, complementing country-specific sanctions. For instance, in response to crackdowns, the EU has listed Belarusian security chiefs and propagandists, as well as figures from Russia, under this regime¹⁹. By targeting perpetrators personally, the EU aims to deter future repression and signal solidarity with victims, without directly punishing the general population.

Support for Civil Society, Independent Media, and Education

Through these instruments, the EU has facilitated the creation of new civic platforms and the strengthening of watchdog organisations. For instance, EU funds have supported human rights monitors in Ukraine and Moldova, anti-corruption NGOs, investigative journalists (such as those exposing high-level graft), women's rights and minority rights groups, and think tanks that produce reform blueprints. In the Southern neighbourhood, the EU's civil society support helped Tunisia's vibrant NGO sector flourish after 2011, and continues to fund human rights

¹⁹ European Council. "EU sanctions against Belarus." *Consilium*. (Page last updated: September 27, 2024.) <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-belarus/>

networks in Morocco, Lebanon, and elsewhere. However, the impact and adaptation of this support are under constant review. The post-2020 period has seen the EU reflect on how to reach new forms of civic activism, especially youth-led and digital campaigns, as traditional NGOs face repression. Analysts have urged the EU to engage more with informal movements and to provide micro-grants to grassroots activists, not just large, well-established NGOs. The EU has responded by simplifying some grant procedures and launching programs to help civic activists with digital security and local fundraising (to reduce sole dependence on foreign aid)²⁰.

The EU increasingly includes media freedom initiatives in its democracy toolbox. Recognising that independent journalism and access to unbiased information are fundamental for democratic debate, EU funds have supported journalism training, content production, and the establishment of public-service media standards in neighbour states. Under the Eastern Partnership, for example, an EU Regional Media Facility was set up to support fact-checkers and regional media outlets. The EU has financed the translation and broadcasting of independent Russian-language content to counter disinformation in Eastern Europe. When regimes shut down media at home, the EU assists exiled media: a case in point is Belarus, where after 2020 many journalists fled – EU funding (often via the EED or direct grants) has helped Belarusian independent outlets like Belsat or Tut.by journalists to continue working from abroad, keeping information flowing to citizens via internet and social media. In the Southern neighbourhood, the EU has sponsored programs promoting media-sector reforms (e.g., supporting Tunisia's media regulatory authority and training investigative reporters in Jordan and Lebanon). These efforts are designed to foster a freer press that can scrutinise those in power and expose abuses, thereby deterring some autocratic tendencies.

As a softer but important tool, the EU uses educational and cultural programs to inculcate democratic values and connect the next generation of leaders to Europe. The Erasmus+ program has extended to ENP countries, offering thousands of scholarships for students and academics to study or train in EU countries. Since 2015, the Erasmus+ mobility opportunities have been significantly expanded for the neighbourhood. The new Eastern Partnership agenda, by 2021, aimed for 70,000 student, researcher, and youth exchanges by 2025. Such exchanges broaden young people's horizons, often giving them first-hand experience of living in democracies, and create cross-border networks. The EU also funds civic education projects, leadership programs, and youth dialogues (for example, under the Young Mediterranean Voices initiative and the EaP's EU4Youth program). These help cultivate a

²⁰ Ibid

culture of active citizenship and critical thinking, which are antithetical to authoritarianism. Educational reform support is another aspect – EU technical advice has helped update curricula and promote teaching of civic education, human rights, and Holocaust remembrance in some neighbour countries. While these measures have long-term impacts, they are an essential part of fostering local ownership of democratic values.

Conflict Prevention and Security Instruments

Autocrats often exploit conflicts and security threats to justify authoritarian measures. The EU's conflict prevention and crisis management instruments therefore indirectly contribute to maintaining a democratic space. The Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) and its successor under NDICI provide funding for projects that address crises, support peace processes, and build community resilience. For example, IcSP has funded local peacebuilding and dialogue initiatives in Ukraine's conflict-affected Donbas region and in Syria, empowering civil society to mitigate violence. The EU also deploys Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in some neighbouring states, such as the monitoring mission in Georgia (EUMM) and the border assistance missions in Ukraine, Moldova, and Libya. These missions promote stability and confidence, which can prevent hardliners from using insecurity as a pretext to erode freedoms. In 2023, the EU established a civilian monitoring mission in Armenia along the border with Azerbaijan to help reduce tensions – a step aimed at preventing conflict escalation and supporting Armenia's democratic government in a fragile situation. Additionally, the EU supports security sector reform in partner countries (training police, promoting community policing, and human rights-compliant practices). A professional, accountable security sector is vital to prevent security forces from being tools of repression. For instance, EU programs have trained judges and police in Moldova and Ukraine on European human rights standards, seeking to reduce abuses that undermine democracy. While these measures fall under security cooperation, they intersect with the democracy agenda by promoting rule-of-law and discouraging militarisation of politics.

Sanctions and Restrictive Measures

When faced with acute autocratization – such as power grabs or violent repression – the EU has resorted to sanctions as a coercive instrument. EU sanctions (officially referred to as "restrictive measures") can range from arms embargoes and asset freezes to sectoral economic bans and are decided upon by unanimous agreement of member states in the Council. Notably, the EU imposed sanctions on Belarus following the fraudulent August 2020 elections and ensuing crackdown. Starting in October 2020, the EU approved several rounds of sanctions

targeting Belarusian officials responsible for election fraud and human rights abuses, including President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his close circle. Over time, these were expanded to include oligarchs, state propagandists, and entities funding the regime. The purpose, as stated by the Council, was to *"put pressure on the Belarusian political leadership to prevent further violence and repression, release all political prisoners... and initiate a genuine national dialogue"* ²¹. The EU made it clear that these sanctions were tied to democratic benchmarks – they would be lifted only if repression ceased and an inclusive political process was initiated. Furthermore, the EU explicitly coupled sanctions with positive incentives for a democratic transition, declaring readiness to *"support a peaceful democratic transition... with a variety of instruments, including a comprehensive plan of economic support for a democratic Belarus"* ²². Indeed, in late 2020 the European Commission prepared a generous economic aid package (around €3 billion) to be delivered to a future democratic Belarus. This two-pronged approach – sanctions plus a conditional reward – exemplifies the EU's strategy to resist autocratization: raise the cost of repression for the regime, while holding out the benefits of integration and aid if democracy is restored.

The EU has also used sanctions in other neighbourhood cases of gross backsliding or abuse. In the Southern Neighbourhood, the EU maintains a broad sanctions regime on Syria (since 2011) due to the Assad regime's atrocities, which includes travel bans on officials and restrictions on equipment used for internal repression. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and further in 2022 (an extreme case of authoritarian aggression undermining a neighbour's democracy), the EU launched unprecedented sanctions on the Russian government and its Belarusian collaborators – indirectly signalling that external autocratic interference will be penalised. In Turkey, a candidate country but increasingly autocratic, the EU has been more cautious with sanctions; however, limited sanctions were imposed in 2020 on Turkish individuals involved in unauthorised gas drilling in the East Mediterranean (a rule-of-law related dispute), and arms export restrictions were considered by some member states after Turkey's domestic crackdowns. Generally, the EU prefers targeted sanctions over blanket ones, aiming to pressure regime insiders while avoiding harm to the general population or civil society. The new Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime has enabled more agility in this regard, as seen by its use to penalise officials for media gag laws, torture, or election violence

²¹ European Council. "EU sanctions against Belarus." *Consilium*. (Page last updated: September 27, 2024.)

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-belarus/>

²² *Ibid.*

in various countries (the toolbox was, for instance, discussed regarding Tunisia's leaders after 2021, though the EU has not yet sanctioned Tunisian officials).

The impact of EU sanctions on democratisation is debated. In Belarus, sanctions have not yet changed Lukashenka's behaviour or led to dialogue – repression continued, and the regime pivoted further towards Russian support. However, sanctions have *"further isolated the Belarusian regime internationally"* and signalled moral clarity²³. They have also *"ramped up support for Belarusian civil society and democratic forces in exile"* by demonstrating that the EU stands with them and by cutting off regime revenue that could fund oppression²⁴. The success of sanctions often depends on being combined with other measures and on the degree of international unity. At a minimum, the use of sanctions expresses the EU's normative stance and can deter some of the worst abuses by raising the personal costs for perpetrators.

Across these varied cases of autocratization, the European Commission's DG NEAR and the European External Action Service are the main actors shaping and implementing the response, in coordination with EU Delegations on the ground. The European External Action Service (EEAS), led by the High Representative, handles diplomatic engagements – issuing demarches, coordinating positions among member states, and maintaining dialogue with both governments and opposition groups. The European Commission, particularly through its Neighbourhood Policy arm, manages aid programs and technical support, adjusting them as needed (for example, suspending budget support when benchmarks are breached or launching new civil society initiatives when opportunities arise). The European Parliament often acts as the "conscience" of the EU, keeping human rights on the agenda through resolutions, hearings (which invite activists to testify), and by scrutinising Commission spending for consistency with its values. Meanwhile, the Council (comprising member states) must agree on significant moves, such as sanctions or new strategies – their differing interests (commercial, security, and historical ties) sometimes blunt or delay EU responses to autocrats, as seen in the initial response to Tunisia. Nevertheless, when consensus is reached – as with the Belarus sanctions or the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova – it lends significant weight to the EU's actions. Ultimately, the local impact of EU instruments is felt in numerous incremental improvements: fairer elections here, a corrupt judge removed there, a new press law drafted

²³ Leukavets, Victoria. (2025). *The European Offer for Democratic Belarus: A Strategic Agenda for the EU* (SCCEUS Report No. 7). Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies. [https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/other-publications/the-european-offer-for-democratic-belarus-a-strategic-agenda-for-the-eu_report_sceeus.pdf](https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/other-publications/the-european-offer-for-democratic-belarus-a-strategic-agenda-for-the-eu-report_sceeus.pdf)

²⁴ Ibid

with EU expertise, an opposition coalition emboldened by EU support, or simply the survival of independent voices under repression. These do not always halt the tide of autocratization – as seen in Belarus or Tunisia – but they lay the groundwork that can be activated when the political winds change. When the EU speaks with one voice and backs it up with both carrots and sticks, it has demonstrated its ability to influence the trajectory of its neighbours. The ongoing challenge will be to do so even in difficult cases, and to maintain credibility by 'leading by example' in promoting democracy at home while encouraging it abroad.

2. Innovative Practices in Countering Autocratisation in the EU Neighbourhood: Case Studies

Since 2020, resilience has become a central concept within the European Neighbourhood Policy. However, its practical implementation raises systemic questions regarding the consequences of this pragmatic approach for the varied trajectories of liberal democracy in the region. By prioritising indirect instruments such as technical assistance, sectoral cooperation funding, capacity-building initiatives, and support for grassroots actors to help partners absorb economic, political, or social shocks, the EU risks retreating from more contentious forms of political engagement..²⁵ Academic analyses caution that this strategy may inadvertently undermine democratic practices. For example, offering benefits in exchange for reforms, providing tailored incentive packages, or relaxing conditionality, such as granting market access without requiring substantive political change, weaken efforts to counter autocratisation or may even be exploited to reinforce it..²⁶

Recent policy developments illustrate these contradictions. The 2021 Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood and its associated Investment Plan revitalised relations through economic and technical cooperation but deprioritised politically sensitive issues such as human rights..²⁷ Similarly, the EU - Morocco Green Partnership (2022) advances shared agendas on climate resilience and sustainable agriculture while avoiding engagement with Morocco's position on Western Sahara or broader political reform..²⁸ A more acute example is the EU-Tunisia Migration Pact, which links enhanced border control and migration deterrence to increased collaboration with a regime embattled by human rights violations and authoritarian practices. In this context, Europe has increasingly come to symbolise complicity

²⁵ Juncos, Ana E. "Resilience as the New EU Foreign Policy Paradigm: A Pragmatist Turn?" *European Security*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2016.1247809>.

²⁶ Bosse, Giselle. "Markets versus Morals? Assessing EU Arms Exports to Autocratic Regimes in its Closer and Wider Neighbourhood." *The European Neighbourhood Policy in a Comparative Perspective: Models, Challenges, Lessons*, edited by Sieglinde Gstöhl, Routledge, 2016, pp. 282–302; MAJALAT II Consortium. *Policy Recommendations on Freedom of Expression, Civic Space, and Human Rights Defenders in the MENA Neighbourhood South Region*. EuroMed Rights, Sept. 2024. https://euomedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/ENG_MAJALAT-POLICY-RECOMMENDATIONS-ON-FREEDOM-OF-EXPRESSION-CIVIC-SPACE-AND-HUMAN-RIGHTS-DEFENDERS-IN-THE-MENA_NEIGHBOURHOOD-SOUTH-REGION-September-2024-_ENG.pdf.

²⁷ Lannon, Erwoan. "The Externalization of EU Policies in the Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: The Potential Impact of the New Mediterranean Agenda." *Mediterranean Yearbook*, 2021, pp. 17–23.

²⁸ Němečková, Tereza, and Maria Josua Malzi. "Unveiling Moroccan Perspectives on the EU-Morocco Green Partnership: Assessing Its Potential for a Sustainable Future for Morocco." *Environmental Politics*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2024, pp. 27–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2024.2333226>.

in autocratisation.²⁹ The pact reveals tensions between the EU's stated liberal values and the operational priorities of migration management³⁰, as evidenced by the erosion of asylum protection, the expansion of border surveillance, and the outsourcing of enforcement to third countries.. Ongoing collaboration with illiberal or hybrid regimes, such as Egypt or Azerbaijan, in the name of stability, migration control, or energy security, further reflects a transformation of the EU's normative commitments and a shift towards political expediency in democracy promotion.³¹ Even where the EU's engagement is framed as democratic support, outcomes are mixed. The EU–Georgia Association Agreement, for instance, has resulted in uneven progress in good governance and transparency, raising questions about whether economic liberalisation and commercial openness alone can effectively address entrenched democratic barriers in Georgia or elsewhere.³²

The reliance on economic incentives within the European Neighbourhood Policy presents significant challenges for liberal democracy. Neoliberal reforms in the Middle East, frequently implemented in authoritarian contexts, have often exacerbated inequality and poverty rather than alleviating them.³³ They have strengthened private financial systems that do not share EU concerns regarding the democratisation of resources..³⁴In Georgia, the government has been accused of selectively using EU conditionality to avoid reforms that would threaten its interests. ³⁵ In Tunisia, agricultural reforms have been at the core of the contestations of the Neighbourhood model.³⁶ The banking reform in Egypt has also indirectly supported the government's authoritarian turn since 2020 because it centralised power, for instance for digital services. Such reforms tend to worsen existing inequalities unless they are

²⁹ Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. "Externalizing Migration Control to the MENA Region: Tunisia." The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 1 May 2025, <https://timep.org/2025/05/01/externalizing-migration-control-to-the-mena-region-tunisia/>.

³⁰ El Fegier, Moataz. Human Rights and the European Neighborhood Policy: Europe Retreats, Southern Mediterranean States Hostile to Human Rights in the Ascendant. European Council on Foreign Relations, 2010.

³¹ Góra, Magdalena. "It's Security, Stupid! Politicisation of the EU's Relations with Its Neighbours." *European Security*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2021, pp. 439–463. Taylor & Francis, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.1957841>.

³² <https://epc-web-s3.s3.amazonaws.com/content/PDF/2024/PS-Social-Agenda-DIGITAL.pdf>

³³ Mason, Robert. "Recovering EU–Egypt Relations, but Core Political Issues Remain." *EuroMeSCo Spot-On*, no. 8, Dec. 2018, <https://south.euneighbours.eu/publication/euromesco-spot-ndeg8-recovering-eu-egypt-relations-core-political/>.

³⁴ Günay, Cengiz. "Reality Check: Why the EU Needs to Rethink Its Neighbourhood Policy." *EuroMeSCo Paper*, no. 29, Sept. 2016, European Institute of the Mediterranean, <https://www.euromesco.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/201609-EuroMeSCo-Paper-29.pdf>.

³⁵ Tsuladze, Lia, et al. "De-Europeanization as Discursive Disengagement: Has Georgia 'Got Lost' on Its Way to European Integration?" *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2024, pp. 297–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2278072>.

³⁶ Rudloff, Bettina, and Isabelle Werenfels. EU-Tunisia DCFTA: Good Intentions Not Enough. Shift Needed from Deep to Deliberate, Comprehensive to Coherent and from Free to Fair Trade. SWP Comment 49/2018, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 22 Nov. 2018, www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/eu-tunisia-dcfta-good-intentions-not-enough.

carefully adapted to local conditions and account for social consequences. In Jordan, for instance, reforms have been found to disproportionately benefit an economic elite, reduce investment in social services, and harm local producers.³⁷

These developments raise important questions about the scope and limitations of democratic practice within an increasingly pragmatic framework.³⁸ Although certain indicators of participation may show improvement, liberal democracy, grounded in pluralism, the rule of law, and minority rights, does not necessarily progress at the same rate. The European Union's democracy agenda has become more technocratic, fragmented, and disconnected from ideological narratives, which complicates efforts to foster participation or civic engagement that could lead to democratic consolidation. In many cases, EU interventions coexist with, if not indirectly legitimise, regimes actively consolidating authoritarian power and the EU risks contributing to the stabilisation of illiberal governance.³⁹ Moreover, the experience of countering authoritarianism with democracy can produce short-term instability, which is then used to justify increased securitisation, further reinforcing the cycle of illiberal governance under the guise of resilience.

Against this backdrop, the case studies examined in this report take stock of, map, and analyse a set of innovative practices that confront the limitations and inconsistencies of normative models of democracy and provide pathways toward more pluralistic forms of engagement.

We consider these cases to be innovative because:

- They adopt a societal approach to countering autocratisation in the Neighbourhood, integrating societal and economic conditions, representation, and institutionalism with democratic practices. In doing so, they address the gaps and ambiguities created by institutional reforms that are not accompanied by revised behaviours and practices.

- They provide integrated perspectives on the structural drivers of authoritarianism, in that they recognise how structural issues, such as gender inequality, social exclusions, marginalisation and poverty, intersect, for instance, with

³⁷ Sgarra, Stefania. "Jordan's Protests and Neoliberal Reforms: Walking on Thin Ice." *IAI Commentaries*, no. 18|44, Aug. 2018, Istituto Affari Internazionali, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/jordans-protests-and-neoliberal-reforms-walking-thin-ice>.

³⁸ Solander, Nea. "Everything but Liberal – Aid and EU Democracy Promotion in the European Neighbourhood." *Journal of European Integration*, 2025, pp. 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2025.2457014>.

³⁹ Dandashly, Assem, and Gergana Noutcheva. "Unintended Consequences of EU Democracy Support in the European Neighbourhood." *The International Spectator*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2019, pp. 105–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2019.1554340>.

disinformation and extremism. They equally place an emphasis on education and learning as methods to prevent the erosion of trust, the radicalisation of views, or support for authoritarian practices.

- They advance a more "networked" type of governance beyond top-down approaches, encourage track-two diplomacy and collaborations with non-state actors (NGOs, municipalities, think tanks). They also support micro-level interventions, such as setting up funding schemes that consider pluralism, participation, and inclusion, and creating spaces to engage with the specific and often overlooked local dynamics of liberal democracy.

- They engage in expanded democratic practices, such as electoral participation, deliberative forums, and civil society engagement, encouraging political avenues beyond party politics.

These case studies mark a shift away from a narrowly technical or "procedural" understanding of democracy, once centered on electoral administration or legal reforms and institutional engineering. Such approaches have often produced "democracies without democrats" or systems that preserve the outward appearances of democratic governance without enabling genuine political openness⁴⁰. In contrast, the cases examined here seek to foster substantive democratic participation, strengthen accountability, and create spaces for citizens to engage.⁴¹

At the same time, they reveal a core paradox of liberal democracy governance where initiatives support democratic processes while also refraining to confront entrenched power structures and their ideologies. Competing visions of governance, often rooted in post-colonial narratives, religious frameworks, or nationalist projects, challenge the liberal norms that underpin EU engagement, making the political landscape one of deep dissensus over legitimacy and justice. The deliberate avoidance of engagements with *dissensus* in programmatic design and implementation highlights a broader tension at the heart of responses to autocratisation: the pull between prioritising stability and recognising dissensus as an essential dimension of democratic life.

⁴⁰ Abbott, Pamela, and Andrea Teti. "Strangers in Plain Sight: Conceptions of Democracy in EU Neighbourhood Policy and Public Opinion across North Africa." *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2022, pp. 691–713. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2021.1923011>.

⁴¹ Dandashly, Assem, and Gergana Noutcheva. "Unintended Consequences of EU Democracy Support in the European Neighbourhood." *The International Spectator*, vol. 54, no. 1, Mar. 2019, pp. 105–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2019.1554340>.

Prevention of Violent Extremism

The prevention of extremism and radicalisation as a policy and practice area has increasingly shifted from a normative to a procedural approach within EU internal and foreign policy. Since 2020, both policy and initiatives focusing on the prevention of extremism and radicalisation in the Neighbourhood have moved away beyond a narrow, security-focused lens to address the underlying roots, ecosystems, and knowledge networks informing radicalisation and extremism, echoing similar internal shifts in global practice⁴² This development reflects similar changes in global practice and a broader understanding of radicalisation as a socio-political phenomenon embedded in local contexts and historical legacies.⁴³ Radicalisation is no longer viewed solely as an ideological issue or as external to European values. Instead, it is increasingly recognised as rooted in socio-political dynamics, including dissatisfaction with or dissent from Europe's liberal democratic model. The roots and pathways of radicalisation have become more complex, particularly as models of European liberal democracy are contested and selectively appropriated by authoritarian actors for domestic political purposes. Georgia, Armenia, Tunisia, and Egypt exemplify cases where dissensus over EU norms, historical memory, and democracy narratives has been mobilised either to resist external influence or as a strategy for domestic legitimisation.

Georgia exemplifies the challenges posed by returnees from ISIS (Daesh)-controlled territories, whose presence has heightened concerns regarding radicalisation trajectories within the country. In 2017, violent clashes occurred between these individuals and special forces in Tbilisi.⁴⁴ Radical right groups have also demonstrated significant activity, primarily targeting immigrant communities and maintaining strong affiliations with the Orthodox Church. These groups have publicly advocated for the abolition of pluralism. Factions associated with the United National Movement, a party founded by Mikheil Saakashvili, were particularly prominent during the Tbilisi Pride events in 2021.⁴⁵

EU-sponsored P/CVE policy and initiatives illustrate both the pragmatism and the contradictions of European foreign policy. Although the EU maintains a low-profile political

⁴² Antonelli, Fabrizio, Salvatore Musolino, and Vincenzo Rosato. "Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: A Comparison between European Countries." *International Review of Sociology*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2023, pp. 381–387. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2024.2322329>.

⁴³ Abbas, Tahir. "Radicalisation Studies: An Emerging Interdisciplinary Field." *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 75, no. 2, 2024, pp. 232–238. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13068>.

⁴⁴ 'One Soldier, Three Gunmen Killed As Counterterror Operation Ends In Tbilisi', Radio Free Europe, November 2017. <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-tbilisi-terror-operation/28869310.html>

⁴⁵ US Gov, Country reports on terrorism 2021. Available at: georgia <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2021/georgia>

approach in these regions, it simultaneously forges strong connections related to migration and security while increasing its involvement in the legal system and social structures to advance its security interests. The Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE) program serves as a principal instrument of European foreign policy in this domain, aiming to address radicalisation through non-coercive, locally driven initiatives and programs that emphasize anti-radicalisation efforts within spaces of democratic contestation.⁴⁶

STRIVE operates in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (including Jordan and Iraq), and specifically in the European Neighbourhood. The program simultaneously prioritizes grassroots intervention and institutional reform by employing indirect and detailed strategies, such as fostering community growth and development, to address the root causes of radicalisation. By targeting socio-economic disparities, political marginalisation, and human rights violations that contribute to extremist ideologies, STRIVE distinguishes itself from traditional security-focused models. It addresses underlying social conditions identified by scholars as triggers for radicalisation, including youth marginalisation, economic hardship, and the influence of media literacy and information cycles that reinforce extremist narratives.⁴⁷ Accordingly, STRIVE implements preventive measures such as community development, vocational training, civic education, and media literacy to provide sustained interventions against radicalisation..

This multidimensional approach integrates local-level interventions, including community dialogues, youth-led radio programs, and gender-sensitive training, with strategic national-level support. For example, initiatives in Jordan, Tunisia, and Georgia have engaged women, youth, and marginalized groups in co-creating narratives, promoted youth-focused social media campaigns, and provided training for key actors such as local police, educators, and community leaders. [STRIVE Kenya](#) addressed structural factors and group dynamics, with a particular focus on individual incentives.. The [Strong Cities](#) launched in 2022 under the STRIVE framework, supports city-led actions against hate, extremism, and polarization by recognizing the local roots of these threats in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and strengthening the capacities of local governments and communities. This demonstrates a commitment to empowering municipal-level actors. [Hedayah](#), another initiative originating

⁴⁶ Ludescher, David. "Hedayah Presents the STRIVE Global Program." Hedayah, 15 Mar. 2021, <https://hedayah.com/strive-global-in-focus-hedayah-presents-the-strive-global-program/>.

⁴⁷ Zeiger, Sara, editor. *Expanding the Evidence Base for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: Research Solutions*. Hedayah, 2018.

from STRIVE, enhances the capacity of state and non-state actors to counter radicalization and recruitment through evidence-based practices aligned with national plans. These programs also promote early warning systems, risk management tools, and support NGOs that deliver counter-radicalization messaging and social support.

Program-sponsored initiatives encourage collaborative co-creation and fund projects that advance civic education, vocational training, and cultural dialogue to prevent youth radicalization. These efforts implicitly critique earlier European Union (EU) policies that prioritized Jihadi radicalization while neglecting far-right extremism. By adopting a whole-of-society approach, prevention strategies become more effective through targeted interventions addressing local conditions, marginalized and underserved groups, and by analysing radicalization as a phenomenon within mainstream institutional and political contexts. The Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood (2021) and the Eastern Partnership Initiatives, framed around stability, development, and security, incorporate broad perspectives such as social cohesion, critical thinking, and media literacy. These elements indirectly address radicalization from a wider perspective and also confront far-right pathways.

Although EU/PCVE programming increasingly adopts preventive and social approaches, its underlying theory of change remains only partially articulated. These initiatives are based on the assumption that strengthening social cohesion, civic participation, and local service provision will reduce vulnerability to extremist recruitment by increasing trust in institutions, improving socio-economic inclusion, and enhancing individual agency.⁴⁸ However, intermediate outcomes such as behaviour change, norm internalization, and political trust are difficult to measure, and the relationship between local resilience and long-term ideological disengagement remains empirically unclear. This ambiguity complicates efforts to distinguish between symbolic participation and lasting democratic impact.

Some of the key concerns around the P/CVE strategy for the Neighbourhood relate to how the boundaries between security and P/CVE are drawn and how these negotiations intersect with liberal democratic norms. The securitisation of development and of civil society, for instance, by encouraging and supporting primarily pro-European, 'liberal' NGOs, groups or projects, can significantly limit the impact and the range of such initiatives, threatening to reinforce narratives that associate the EU with the erosion of civil liberties and the imposition of ideological conformity.

⁴⁸ United Nations Development Programme. *Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity*. Oslo Governance Centre / UNDP, 2016. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/UNDP%20OGC_PVE%20report_Final_web.pdf

A further structural tension concerns the role of domestic security institutions in shaping P/CVE implementation. While framed as prevention-oriented and non-coercive, P/CVE programming often indirectly expands the authority, resources, and surveillance capacities of security services. In hybrid and authoritarian regimes, this creates an incentive for governments to instrumentalise prevention agendas to legitimise broader monitoring of civil society, opposition actors, and independent media. As a result, the boundary between community-based prevention and state security control becomes increasingly blurred, raising concerns that P/CVE frameworks may contribute to the normalisation of expanded coercive governance under the guise of resilience. By privileging pro-European civil society actors, the EU risks marginalising organisations that may be critical of EU policies, thus entrenching polarisation and undermining perceptions of justice and legitimacy.

Additionally, while the broad framing of preventing extremism is intended to be inclusive and systemic, it may inadvertently contribute to the 'shrinking of civil space'. CSOs are often instrumentalised in the security agenda, and loosely defined methodological frameworks (for instance, those on counter-narratives) can overshadow other work that these actors conduct at the community level.

The effectiveness of P/CVE initiatives also depends heavily on how they are perceived by local communities.⁴⁹ In several Neighbourhood contexts, EU-supported prevention programmes are viewed ambivalently, particularly where they are associated with security agendas, external influence, or selective engagement with politically acceptable actors. In contexts with low institutional trust, community participation may reflect strategic collaboration rather than genuine normative alignment. In contexts where regimes are drifting towards authoritarianism, these programs may be co-opted to justify the suppression of dissent.

Furthermore, although EU programming increasingly acknowledges the multidirectional nature of radicalisation, its operational toolkit still displays uneven effectiveness across ideological spectrums. While community resilience and media literacy approaches have shown some traction in mitigating jihadist recruitment, far-right and ethno-nationalist mobilisation, often embedded within mainstream political discourse and religious institutions, remains more resistant to similar interventions.⁵⁰ In this sense, prevention strategies encounter structural limits when extremist narratives are embedded in dominant identity

⁴⁹ Zsófia Baumann, 'Community-Engagement in P/CVE In the Interest of Communities?', Asser Institute 2025, <https://www.asser.nl/media/798039/ssrn-5324373.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Johannes Baldauf, Julia Ebner and Jakob Guhl (Eds.) "Hate Speech and Radicalisation Online The OCCI Research Report", ISD 2019, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ISD-Hate-Speech-and-Radicalisation-Online-English-Draft-2.pdf>.

frameworks rather than marginal social spaces. This asymmetry highlights the need for distinct prevention logics depending on whether radicalisation emerges from social marginalisation, state-linked identity politics, or elite mobilisation.

Finally, the impact of P/CVE initiatives is mediated by informal systems of power, including patronage networks, clientelist relations, and parallel security economies. Even when formal prevention frameworks emphasise inclusion and participation, local intermediaries often operate within political economies structured by loyalty, access to state resources, and informal coercion. In such settings, the translation of EU-supported prevention norms into practice is selectively filtered through elite interests, limiting the prospects for autonomous community governance and democratic accountability.

Disinformation

Media literacy, particularly the ability to detect and understand false or biased narratives, has become a cornerstone in the EU's policy to combat "disinformation" in the ENP areas. These efforts combine support for independent media, the cultivation of critical thinking skills, the use of digital technology to flag and recognise disinformation, and fact-checking. Funding instruments and institutional collaborations have played a key role in supporting this ecosystem.

In the Eastern Neighbourhood, these efforts are largely coordinated through the [EUvsDisinfo](#) platform, a flagship project of the EU's East StratCom Task Force and of the European External Action Services, which focuses on disinformation attributed to the Russian government. The platform maintains a comprehensive, up-to-date library of disinformation case studies, provides resources, analyses, and fact-checking, and flags persistent or evolving discourses to help users visualise and understand how disinformation builds over time.⁵¹ The content is available in 15 languages, including Russian, Georgian, Ukrainian, and Armenian, enabling a more accurate mapping of the spread and textual variations of disinformation. EUvsDisinfo is also integrated with training and ongoing support for media literacy among journalists and NGOs in Europe and beyond. EUvsDisinfo has been the model emulated in local and more granular initiatives throughout the region. [Myth Detector](#), (founded in Georgia and run by Media Development Foundation) is active in fact-checking and debunking fake news and propaganda, including domestic actors and often uses content developed by EUvsDisinfo. [StopFake.org](#), which originated in Ukraine in 2014 to fact-check Russian disinformation, is also a tool modelled on its European counterpart.

Despite the successes, concerns have been raised about the politisation of disinformation detection. The fact that the EU considers information and factual integrity part of its foreign policy has raised questions about its objectivity and transparency. For example, a 2017 case involving Dutch online media reports of corruption in Ukraine and alternative interpretations of the MH17, which was initially flagged by the platform as disinformation and later retracted, raised questions about inconsistent standards and the lack of clear criteria for inclusion or exclusion. How and to what extent it sets out to identify other types of disinformation, and to what extent it can absorb content critical of the EU, have been enduring points of criticism.

⁵¹ Kuo, Rachel, and Alice Marwick. "Critical Disinformation Studies: History, Power, and Politics." *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-76>.

EUvsDisinfo collaborates with independent fact-checkers and media partners, many of whom have their own political or ideological affiliations, which raises legitimate concerns about unintentional bias, echo chambers of "trusted" sources, and credibility gaps. Studies also suggest that fact-checking polarising identity issues can entrench rather than reduce misinformation, as audiences often reject content that contradicts their preexisting beliefs. Instead, media literacy can be made more effective through systemic and diversified means of training and societal reach, for instance, in education or teacher training.⁵² Some of these challenges are addressed through the [European Digital Media Observatory \(EDMO\)](#), which links fact-checkers, platforms and researchers, supporting a more integrated and reflexive approach to disinformation analysis.⁵³

Disinformation in the Neighbourhood cannot be fully understood without reference to the political economy of local media systems. In many partner countries, media outlets remain structurally dependent on state advertising, oligarchic ownership, or politically aligned investors.⁵⁴ These financial arrangements incentivise loyalty, self-censorship, and selective amplification and reduce journalistic independence to only a few exceptional cases. As a result, even where fact-checking and media literacy initiatives proliferate, polarisation, sensationalism, and regime-aligned narratives dominate. Without addressing these underlying ownership and revenue structures, technical counter-disinformation tools operate in a constrained ecosystem that systematically reproduces distortions.

However, most instruments still under-emphasise the motivational and emotional dimensions of disinformation, that is why individuals engage with certain narratives and how social dynamics, such as group belonging, distrust, or alienation, shape media consumption. Programmes that adopt a more comprehensive understanding of the 'why' of information perpetuation in technology and in social settings, as well as the 'how' of consumption and attraction to this content, have been found to be more effective. Understanding disinformation as a symptom of broader societal conditions, such as declining trust in institutions, polarisation, and a lack of political representation for individuals. These have emerged as essential complements to the biased technical solutions

One initiative that bridges some of these gaps is the ComCom initiative in Georgia, a project that prioritises media literacy as a national priority and involves pilots integrating media

⁵² d’Haenens, Leen, et al. “Fostering Media Literacy: A Systematic Evidence Review of Intervention Effectiveness for Diverse Target Groups.” *Media and Communication*, vol. 13, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8901>.

⁵³ Does not operate in the neighbourhood.

⁵⁴

literacy into school and university curricula. It focuses on curriculum integration, teacher guidebook and training models, teacher training, integration into schools, and various informal initiatives. The project also hosts an online portal www.mediatsigniereba.ge, developed with the support of the Council of Europe (CoE), which consolidates open educational resources on disinformation, fact-checking, cybersecurity and digital citizenship/education. The platform also acts as a collaborative space, uniting international stakeholders, civil society organisations, and public agencies dedicated to advancing media literacy in Georgia.⁵⁵

The "[Digital Innovations for Peace](#)" (DIP) initiative demonstrates a comprehensive approach to countering disinformation in the MENA region⁵⁶ Implemented across Tunisia, Libya, DIP frames disinformation as a societal risk and addresses it through collaboration among media professionals, information and communication technology (ICT) experts, and regional entrepreneurs. These groups jointly advance data-driven journalism, social listening, digital security, and verification practices.⁵⁷ Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a pivotal role in transforming these efforts into community-based campaigns that confront discrimination, hate speech, and the exclusion of marginalised groups. [Djazairouna's](#) campaign in Algeria pursued legal advocacy against hate speech targeting women. In Tunisia, the Académie de Dialogue National developed communication strategies to support African migrants and advocated for the integration of anti-discrimination provisions into legal frameworks.⁵⁸ The IBSAR Initiative promoted digital inclusion for people with disabilities. In Libya, the H2O campaign mobilised youth and civil society to advocate for legal reforms against hate speech, with a particular focus on cybercrime laws to enhance protections for all citizens. Simultaneously, DIP supported media- and technology-focused entrepreneurs through acceleration programmes, addressing issues such as misinformation in Palestinian media (Kashif), public fact-checking training platforms, and digital initiatives supporting Syrian women refugees in Gaziantep.

⁵⁵ Council of Europe. Media Literacy in Formal Education. Council of Europe, 4 Dec. 2023, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/media-literacy-in-formal-education>.

⁵⁶ "The Digital Innovations for Peace (DiP) Project Concludes After 3 Years," South Europa Neighbours, accessed November 30, 2025, <https://south.euneighbours.eu/news/the-digital-innovations-for-peace-dip-project-concludes-after-3-years/>.

⁵⁷ DW Akademie. "Celebrating 3 Years of Building Resilience Against Disinformation in the MENA Region." DW Akademie, 13 June 2024, <https://akademie.dw.com/en/celebrating-3-years-of-building-resilience-against-disinformation-in-the-mena-region/a-71047573>.

⁵⁸ "The Digital Innovations for Peace (DiP) Project Concludes After 3 Years," South Europa Neighbours, accessed November 30, 2025, <https://south.euneighbours.eu/news/the-digital-innovations-for-peace-dip-project-concludes-after-3-years/>.

Several challenges and structural gaps emerge from this short discussion. The excessive politicisation of disinformation issues, coupled with its framing within the foreign policy agenda, has raised concerns about the validity of this approach. Disinformation is often framed through a political lens, neglecting other state or non-state actors and domestic disinformation. Selective framing risks eroding trust in EU approaches to disinformation.

Also, while Russian-origin disinformation remains a major vector in the Eastern Neighbourhood, a growing share of disinformation is now produced, amplified, or tacitly tolerated by domestic political authorities themselves.⁵⁹ Regime-aligned media ecosystems in several partner countries generate endogenous disinformation that targets opposition actors, civil society, ethnic minorities, and independent journalists. These narratives employ the language of sovereignty, national security, or traditional values, complicating their classification as disinformation within EU frameworks that prioritise foreign interference. The limited systematic monitoring of state-sponsored domestic disinformation creates a significant blind spot in EU counter-disinformation policy.

The EU's counter-disinformation approach remains predominantly content-focused and insufficiently attentive to the structural power of digital platforms themselves. Social media companies such as Meta, Google, TikTok, YouTube, and Telegram function as de facto political intermediaries whose algorithmic architectures shape visibility, outrage dynamics, and the monetisation of attention. In the Neighbourhood, platform governance operates with limited transparency and weak regulatory oversight, creating significant asymmetries between global technology corporations and local journalists, civil society organisations, and public institutions. The absence of enforceable accountability mechanisms for platforms constrains the effectiveness of EU-supported fact-checking and media literacy efforts. Tools and frameworks for monitoring non-state propaganda, such as that from extremist groups, conspiracy communities, or algorithmic misinformation, remain underdeveloped.

Digital engagement strategies also unfold in contexts of expanding surveillance and digital repression. In several Neighbourhood countries, cybersecurity laws, counter-extremism legislation, and online monitoring technologies are increasingly deployed to track journalists, activists, and dissidents.⁶⁰ Under these conditions, participation in digital media literacy or

⁵⁹ Revaz Tchitanava, 'To combat disinformation in the Eastern Neighbourhood, the EU needs to think outside of the box', *Youngthinkers*, <https://youngthinkers.ceps.eu/to-combat-disinformation-in-the-eastern-neighbourhood-the-eu-needs-to-think-outside-of-the-box/>.

⁶⁰ "Weaponizing Law: Attacks on Media Freedom — Report 2023," Thomson Reuters Foundation, accessed December 2, 2025, <https://www.trust.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/weaponizing-law-attacks-media-freedom-report-2023.pdf>

reporting platforms may expose individuals to heightened risk rather than empowerment. The protective dimensions of digital safety, encryption, and legal safeguards therefore become as central to counter-disinformation practice as fact-checking itself.

In various regimes in the Neighbourhood, the state increasingly demonstrates adaptive learning in the disinformation field. For instance, in Georgia, the government selectively employs the language of media literacy and digital resilience while simultaneously tightening control over information flows and restricting independent journalism.⁶¹ This form of strategic compliance allows authorities to meet formal EU benchmarks while hollowing out their democratic substance. Counter-disinformation thus risks becoming absorbed into broader architectures of managed information control rather than serving as a vehicle for pluralism.

⁶¹ “Georgia: Independent Journalism on the Brink,” International Press Institute, accessed December 2, 2025, <https://ipi.media/georgia-independent-journalism-on-the-brink/>.

Anti-corruption

Although anti-corruption has been a flagship theme in EU policy towards the Neighbourhood, its implementation has yielded contradictory outcomes and uneven progress amid dissensus and contestation of liberal democracy norms. Anti-corruption also carries identitarian resonances that often polarise local responses.⁶² This is particularly evident in how local actors in the Neighbourhood often instrumentalise the judicial reforms by governments in the region: even pro-European political forces have challenged their reach, revealing the depth of contestations.⁶³ A key tension lies between the institutionalisation and the democratisation of EU-supported anti-corruption strategies in the EU Neighbourhood. While both aim at reform, they often pull in different directions.

In recent years, the EU has placed increased emphasis on strengthening the independence and capacity of judicial structures and anti-corruption agencies from within institutions. These efforts extend beyond legal reforms that merely enact laws and seek to ensure effective implementation, thereby insulating institutions from political interference. Vetting has emerged as a cornerstone of these reforms, aiming to build resilience, restore political trust and promote good governance. EU financial assistance and technical cooperation in countries like Ukraine and Moldova⁶⁴ have increasingly emphasised granular judicial reforms, including vetting procedures for judges and prosecutors that would enhance the mandate and independence of specialised anti-corruption institutions. In the Eastern Neighbourhood, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia have all undertaken close audits of their judicial structures. In 2023, Moldova implemented a prosecutorial vetting system focusing on integrity checks and independence, as well as investigations into the ethical and financial integrity of key members of the General Prosecutor's office and prosecutorial bodies. Capacity-building interventions have supported oversight institutions, such as the Superior Council of

⁶² CHEESEMAN, N. and PEIFFER, C. (2025), Opening the door to anti-system leaders? Anti-corruption campaigns and the global rise of populism. *European Journal of Political Research*, 64: 134-155. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12682>

⁶³ Shea, Jamie. "Georgia: The Dream Turns Bad, but This Is No Time to Disengage." *Friends of Europe*, 31 Oct. 2024, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/critical-thinking-georgia-the-dream-turns-bad-but-this-is-no-time-to-disengage/>.

⁶⁴ European Commission. Commission Opinion on the Republic of Moldova's Application for Membership of the European Union. COM(2022) 406 final, 17 June 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0406>.

the Magistracy⁶⁵. The impact has been notable: many prosecutors under review, especially within the Anti-corruption Prosecutor's Office, resigned rather than undergo the vetting.⁶⁶ Internal resistance has been strong, with some judicial actors attempting to undermine the credibility and effectiveness of the vetting process.⁶⁷ In response, the Justice Minister acknowledged that although the process is uncomfortable, but emphasised its necessity in restoring public trust and aligning Moldova with EU standards.

Elite resistance to anti-corruption reforms rarely takes the form of overt rejection. Instead, incumbents increasingly deploy adaptive counterstrategies, including procedural obstruction, selective compliance, legalistic delay, and the selective enforcement of vetting outcomes. Judicial actors may formally submit to integrity checks while informally coordinating to dilute their impact, challenge their legality, or fragment oversight authority across multiple institutions. These strategies allow political and judicial elites to preserve networks of influence while maintaining superficial alignment with EU reform benchmarks.

In Georgia, prosecutorial vetting revealed entrenched networks of influence in the judiciary, which remained virtually untouched by successive transparency reforms.⁶⁸ In that case, the political sensitivity of vetting showed that the mechanism is vulnerable to manipulation by powerful actors. It triggered significant public controversy. The Venice Commission intervened in that public debate, cautioning that extraordinary vetting procedures must be justified for exceptional circumstances and implemented with proportionality, predictability and strict safeguards for judicial independence.⁶⁹ Indeed, the risks go beyond ‘weaponising’ vetting or politicisation for one group or another. Judicial institutions themselves, including prosecutorial councils and associations, can oppose these measures, frame external scrutiny as a threat to independence, and consequently hold anti-corruption mandates hostage or sway the mandate they have.

Evaluation insights from OSCE further highlight these institutional dynamics and their impact on reform outcomes.⁷⁰ Political elites tend to support reforms when EU incentives such

⁶⁵ Vetting and Justice Reform in the Republic of Moldova.” *Centre for International Legal Cooperation (CILC)*, 5 Feb. 2025, <https://www.cilc.nl/projects/vetting-and-justice-reform-in-the-republic-of-moldova/>.

⁶⁶ <https://ipn.md/en/29-prosecutors-have-resigned-or-have-been-excluded-from-vetting-the-evaluation-continues-in-112-cases/>

⁶⁷ Foști procurori despre reforma Procuraturii.” *Europa Liberă Moldova*, 22 Feb. 2024, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/26816134.html>.

⁶⁸ “Supreme Court Denounces Proposed ‘Vetting’ as Threat to Judicial Independence.” *Civil Georgia*, 11 March. 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/586544>.

⁶⁹ [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2023\)033-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2023)033-e)

⁷⁰ “Vetting and Justice Reform in the Republic of Moldova.” *Center for International Legal Cooperation (CILC)*, 5 Feb. 2025, <https://www.cilc.nl/projects/vetting-and-justice-reform-in-the-republic-of-moldova/>.

as financial assistance, political recognition, trade access, or accession prospects outweigh the risks of elite defection, internal fragmentation, or exposure of entrenched patronage networks. Conversely, when reforms threaten core revenue streams, electoral coalitions, or informal protection arrangements, elites often shift toward symbolic compliance or strategic delay. Anti-corruption outcomes therefore reflect not only institutional design but also changing political calculations within ruling coalitions.

Alongside reforms of institutions, the EU has pursued a more bottom-up approach to anti-corruption, centred on civic tech (technology for public participation), primarily to enhance electoral transparency, another pillar of its governance agenda in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Civic Tech for electoral transparency has been, in the policy's framing, linked to empowering civil society, democratising public opinion around elections, and monitoring. These initiatives operate largely outside traditional institutional channels. In Georgia and Ukraine, the EU has supported real-time data-collection applications to monitor electoral irregularities. One such initiative is Vote Monitor, where observers could report incidents and potential violations in real-time to monitoring headquarters.⁷¹ In 2024, 31 local and 3 international organisations deployed Vote Monitor to observe the Georgian elections. Groups like Public Movement Multinational Georgia (PMMG) and Daakviridi, a student initiative, are utilised as tools to observe elections in the southern part of Georgia, which is inhabited by Armenian and Azerbaijani ethnic minority groups.

These civic tech efforts aim to empower civil society and democratise electoral oversight. However, they have also raised concerns about the overestimation of the digital sphere as inherently democratic. Critics argue that civil society can become isolated from institutional power structures, resulting in disillusionment and a decline in trust in both technology and political processes. Civic tech initiatives are often presented as substitutes for weak institutional accountability, yet their corrective capacity remains structurally limited. Digital reporting platforms can expose irregularities and document violations, but they rarely possess enforcement authority. Where institutional responsiveness is absent, repeated citizen reporting may produce frustration and fatigue rather than mobilisation. In such contexts, transparency without consequence risks deepening public cynicism toward both technology-driven participation and democratic oversight more broadly.

A structural tension also emerges between electoral legitimacy and technocratic judicial oversight. Civic tech platforms seek to democratise accountability through popular monitoring

⁷¹ .Commit Global, <https://www.commitglobal.org/en/blog/georgias-2024-parliamentary-elections-a-historic-decision-point>.

and participation, while vetting mechanisms concentrate authority within specialised judicial and oversight bodies insulated from electoral pressures. In polarised political environments, these two forms of accountability may clash: electoral majorities may resist judicial constraints perceived as elite-driven or externally imposed, while judicial institutions may constrain politically popular but legally problematic reforms. This tension complicates the assumption that institutional strengthening and popular participation are always mutually reinforcing.

A key limitation has been the lack of institutional integration. The lack of institutional integration of such platforms has been repeatedly flagged as a weakness. In Ukraine, platforms designed to report public service failures or electoral violations had a minimal impact when not directly connected to official bodies, such as electoral commissions. Reports of public service failures or campaign violations had limited impact when not connected to electoral commissions or ministries. To address this, newer initiatives, such as the EU4Digital Initiative (Eastern Partnership) and the EaP Civil Society Facility 2.0 (2022–2025), are shifting their focus towards supporting local digital ecosystems rather than developing one-off apps. These programs focus on interoperability and cross-border digital ecosystems, as well as scaling successful digital civic tools, mentoring, and collaboration across countries. The platform supports digital reporting of electoral issues tied to electoral commissions and ombudsperson offices, addressing a lack of institutional embedding.

Anti-corruption has increasingly become a terrain of political contestation rather than a purely technocratic governance reform. In several Neighbourhood contexts, corruption investigations are selectively mobilised as instruments of factional struggle, used to weaken rivals, discipline defections within ruling coalitions, or delegitimise opposition forces, such as in Tunisia. In such environments, the language of integrity and reform can coexist with highly strategic enforcement, blurring the boundary between accountability and political weaponisation. This dynamic risk eroding public trust in anti-corruption institutions themselves. But the EU is increasingly promoting co-creation models that include public institutions, local authorities and civil society organisations as equal partners in the design and implementation of civic tech. EU-funded projects in the Neighbourhood are required to incorporate impact assessments, user analytics, and feedback loops. Platforms like the EU Digital Participatory Toolbox are being developed to document lessons learned and reusable civic tech models.

Over time, authoritarian and hybrid regimes in the Neighbourhood have demonstrated significant learning capacity in their engagement with EU-driven anti-corruption agendas. Rather than rejecting reform outright, they increasingly assimilate the language of transparency,

integrity, and judicial independence into their governance discourse while reconfiguring enforcement to preserve political control. This strategic assimilation allows regimes to secure continued external support while limiting redistributive or disciplining effects on ruling elites. Anti-corruption thus becomes not only a reform instrument but also a stabilisation resource for adaptive authoritarian governance.

Human rights and equality

The EU policy in its Neighbourhood has increasingly diversified its engagement with issues of human rights and equality, moving towards a more layered and flexible approach. One example is the Med Dialogue for Rights and Equality programme, a core instrument of foreign policy on human rights and equality, which has responded to some of the challenges presented by the ENP, notably its top-down normative expectation of human rights alignment. The program prioritises the establishment of a structured dialogue between civil society organisations (CSOs) and EU institutions. This format moves beyond ad-hoc consultations, aiming for regular, transparent, and planned engagements that enable civil society to shape policies affecting their communities actively.⁷² This program relies on a systematic process to strengthen organisations' capacities to strategize, cooperate, and advocate effectively, thereby improving local conditions. It also fosters regional North-South exchanges, enriching democratic dialogue and diversifying interpretations of liberal democracy.⁷³

A strength of the program is the collaboration with Framework Partners that are established civil society organisations with strong human rights, good governance, economic development and climate change mandates themselves, including Arab Reform Initiative, Euro-Med Rights, Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders, Norwegian Refugee Council, Minorities Rights Group. Its objectives include direct financial support and capacity-building programs to independent CSOs, such as watchdog organisations, human rights defenders, and groups advocating for transparency and accountability. This support facilitates accountability for structural reforms from the ground up and enables targeted community-level actions, addressing the persistent lack of ownership and continuity of such initiatives in democratic oversight. The program explicitly aims to counter the 'shrinking of public space' and implicitly opens new possibilities for non-state actors to increase representation. It puts emphasis on supporting young women and men activists.⁷⁴ Its second iteration, since 2023, has specifically prioritised a structured dialogue between CSOs and EU key actors on good governance and human rights.

Examples of the projects supported include initiatives by the Anna Lindh Foundation, which provides training and opportunities for collaboration among young leaders from the

⁷² DAI, <https://www.dai.com/our-work/projects/regional-med-dialogue-for-rights-and-equality-ii-civil-society-facility-south>.

⁷³ European Partnership for Democracy (EPD). Med Dialogue for Rights and Equality. EPD, <https://epd.eu/what-we-do/programmes/med-dialogue-for-rights-and-equality/>.

Southern Neighbourhood in policy dialogue and advocacy activities, building collaborative relationships and alumni networks among them.⁷⁵ A similar model underpins the Mirsal project.⁷⁶ In another example, [EuroHealthNet](#), in collaboration with Med Rights, focuses on improving the free flow of health information and citizen engagement as a response to the shrinking public space. All these initiatives place significant emphasis on engaging young activists and marginalised groups, recognising them as key partners in policy dialogue and advocacy activities. Through leadership programs and community-based alumni networks, Med Dialogue fosters participation in shaping policies and programs that address the region's developmental challenges.

While Med Dialogue for Rights and Equality represents an innovative shift in the EU's approach to the region, by betting on non-state actors to increase democratic accountability, it also raises new questions about improving democratic practices. Chief among them is how democracy can succeed in systems where institutions are the primary obstacles to the realisation of rights. Although the program arguably addresses the issue of 'shrinking public space,' there is a lack of foresight regarding the implications of democratic practices in light of legal and practical restrictions on freedom of association, assembly, or expression. By operating "around" the state, through growing communities, external advocacy, and digital activism, the program often places the burden of change on individuals operating in contexts where justice and protection mechanisms are weak or absent.

EU-supported human rights and equality initiatives increasingly operate in environments characterised by organised backlash and counter-mobilisation. In several Neighbourhood contexts, ruling elites, religious authorities, and nationalist movements actively frame gender equality, minority rights, and civic freedoms as foreign impositions that threaten cultural sovereignty and social order. These “traditional values” narratives are strategically deployed to delegitimise supported civil society actors, justify restrictive legislation, and mobilise conservative constituencies. Yet EU programming rarely incorporates systematic analysis of these counter-movements or develops explicit strategies for engaging with, or mitigating, organised rights backla

"Structured dialogues" have, in some case, yielded limited concrete outcomes, even when policy recommendations are formulated. There is also an implicit depoliticised framing of civil society, stemming from the avoidance of engagement with nascent or contentious social

⁷⁵ “Young Civil Society Leadership Programme.” Anna Lindh Foundation, 2024, <https://alf.website/en/young-civil-society-leadership-programme/>.

⁷⁶ <https://www.mirsal.fi/chairperson-participates-in-med-dialogue-for-rights-and-equality/>

movements or more radical forms of activism which can run the risk of overlooking the full spectrum of democratic participation. If it continues to rely primarily on a select cohort of professionalised CSOs, it may fail to foster broader inclusion and deeper grassroots representation.

Moreover, the program's narrative of democracy and rights often presides over the emergence of anti-democratic and illiberal actors, which are increasingly present both within the Neighbourhood and inside the EU itself. This contradiction is rarely addressed in programmatic design. A more consistent approach would require addressing how supported CSOs counter hate speech, disinformation or discriminatory rhetoric of far-right and ideologically motivated movements,

At the other end of the engagement spectrum are examples of grass-root initiatives supported by programs and strategies of the ENP, such as the International Accountability Platform for Belarus (IAPB), launched in March 2021 by a coalition of Belarusian and international non-governmental organisations. Its goal is to collect, consolidate, verify, and preserve evidence of severe human rights violations committed in Belarus, particularly in the wake of the 2020 presidential elections and the subsequent crackdown on dissent.⁷⁷ The IAPB directly addresses impunity for grave human rights violations in Belarus by documenting enforced disappearances for potential legal proceedings in national and international courts. Since the fraudulent 2020 presidential election, the Belarusian regime has systematically suppressed dissent through violence, torture, and arbitrary detentions. The EU has been a key political and financial supporter of the IAPB since its inception, primarily through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI – "Global Europe"), which enables flexible and targeted support to civil society and human rights initiatives, often bypassing government channels.

The IAPB's work aims to ensure that those responsible for these crimes do not escape justice and for historical and juridical accountability.⁷⁸ The platform empowers local NGOs and civil society actors to play a central role in accountability processes with key partners, including DIGNITY (Danish Institute Against Torture), Viasna Human Rights Centre, and the

⁷⁷ Andreyuk, Eugenia. "International Mechanisms for Accountability for Human Rights Violations in Belarus." German Marshall Fund of the United States, 18 Jan. 2022, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/international-mechanisms-accountability-human-rights-violations-belarus>.

⁷⁸ United Kingdom, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. "Joint Statement by 19 States in Support of the Establishment of the International Accountability Platform for Belarus." GOV.UK, 24 Mar. 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-by-19-states-in-support-of-the-establishment-of-the-international-accountability-platform-for-belarus>.

International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus. It adopts a survivor-centred and trauma-informed approach, providing mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and ensuring the dignity of victims throughout the evidence-collection process. As of early 2025, it contains over 29,000 documents related to 2,600 interviewees (victims and witnesses), as well as over one million archival materials from open sources.⁷⁹ This collection includes witness statements, medical reports, court records, photographs, videos, and text items. The platform prioritises a survivor-centred, trauma-informed approach to its evidence collection, ensuring the dignity and well-being of victims and witnesses.

In situations where state authorities are actively repressing civil society, initiatives like the IAPB provide a vital lifeline for documenting abuses. This structure strengthens the capacity of local human rights defenders and ensures their expertise is central to the accountability efforts⁸⁰. The IAPB has provided substantial assistance to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in examining the human rights situation in Belarus. This includes facilitating access to victims and witnesses, as well as sharing its extensive collection of information and evidence. The IAPB's contributions have been reflected in OHCHR reports to the UN Human Rights Council⁸¹. In January 2025, the IAPB submitted a comprehensive communication to the Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC, providing factual and legal analyses of alleged crimes against humanity in Belarus, including deportation, persecution, and other inhumane acts. This submission directly supports Lithuania's referral of the situation in Belarus to the ICC.

The IAPB cannot operate openly within Belarus. Its evidence collection relies heavily on information from victims and witnesses who have fled the country, or on open-source intelligence. This necessarily creates challenges in corroborating information, accessing primary sources, and ensuring the safety of those still inside Belarus who might contribute information or justice to be served, the IAPB relies on national prosecutors in other countries to open investigations based on universal jurisdiction or for international bodies like the ICC to act (which is still a preliminary examination for Belarus). This requires the political will and resources of individual states, which can fluctuate. Not all states are equally willing or able to pursue such cases.

⁷⁹ International Accountability Platform for Belarus. "IAPB: 14,300 Documents Relating to 2,052 Survivor-Victims Already Digitized and Archived." Viasna, 8 Feb. 2023, <https://spring96.org/en/news/110702>.

⁸⁰ International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH). "Belarus: Six Human Rights Organisations Submit Evidence of Crimes." FIDH, 8 August 2023, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/belarus/belarus-six-human-rights-organisations-submit-evidence-of-crimes>.

⁸¹ *ibid*

Overall, the EU's evolving approach to human rights and equality in its Neighbourhood reveals both innovation and contradiction. Overall, programs like Med Dialogue for Rights and Equality demonstrate a strategic shift towards civil society and structured dialogue. Yet this engagement often remains bounded by a tension between institutional engagement and grassroots or adversarial accountability, as in the case of IAPB, highlighting the need for a framework that acknowledges the growing dissonance between liberal democratic norms and real-world political concerns and a need for a structure that confronts instead of avoiding ideologically based threats to rights and equality.

Human rights promotion is often framed primarily in legal and procedural terms, while its deep entanglement with material inequality receives less sustained attention. In many Neighbourhood countries, persistent poverty, labour precarity, regional disparities, and unequal access to social services fundamentally condition individuals' ability to claim and exercise rights. Where rights mobilisation is disconnected from distributive justice and economic security, participation tends to remain limited to relatively privileged urban groups. This socio-economic filtering risks reinforcing perceptions that rights agendas serve elite interests rather than broad social constituencies.

Ultimately, EU engagement on human rights and equality in the Neighbourhood is increasingly shaped by a triangular tension between rights promotion, security cooperation, and geopolitical stabilisation. In practice, priorities such as migration management, counterterrorism, and regional security frequently constrain the scope and ambition of rights-based conditionality. This structural tension undermines the credibility of the EU's normative commitments and reinforces perceptions of selective or instrumentalised human rights advocacy.

4. Challenges and Limitations of the EU's response to autocratisation in the EU neighbourhood

While the EU has developed a broad and diversified toolbox to counter autocratisation, its approaches continue to face structural and contextual constraints. These limitations stem from both programmatic design and the political environments in which EU instruments are inserted, marked by elite resistance, informal power, legitimacy construction, and adaptive authoritarian governance. The effectiveness of EU engagement is therefore shaped as much by domestic reception, co-option and strategic compliance as by technical capacity or funding levels. While many programs have increasingly emphasised the importance of tailoring interventions to socio-political conditions and fostering inclusive dialogue, they often fall short in accounting for the pluralistic and at times oppositional nature of these factors. The case studies demonstrate that the contradictions between innovation and limitation are structurally embedded in the implementation process.

In the field of P/CVE, EU programs such as STRIVE illustrate a clear shift away from narrow security paradigms towards community-based and socio-economic prevention. Yet these preventive approaches remain tightly intertwined with security governance. By privileging pro-European intermediaries and operating in close proximity to security agendas, EU-funded prevention work risks reinforcing the securitisation of civil society and narrowing the scope of legitimate participation. In authoritarian-leaning contexts, governments may demonstrate the capacity to appropriate P/CVE narratives of resilience and stability to justify surveillance or suppression of dissent. The challenge is therefore not only inclusivity, but also ensuring that P/CVE remains separated from broader architectures of coercive state control.

In the disinformation field, EU-supported initiatives such as EUvsDisinfo, Myth Detector, and Digital Innovations for Peace have strengthened fact-checking ecosystems and media literacy. However, these efforts continue to be constrained by the political economy of media, platform governance, and audience polarisation. The persistent focus on foreign, particularly Russian, disinformation has led to an underemphasis on domestic sources, far-right propaganda, and conspiracy networks. Moreover, an over-reliance on technical fixes underestimates the emotional, identity-based, and trust-related drivers of information consumption. Where fact-checking is perceived as partisan or externally aligned, it may entrench rather than reduce polarisation, thereby weakening its democratic corrective function.

Judicial vetting and institutional anti-corruption reforms in countries such as Moldova and Ukraine underscore the EU's renewed emphasis on institutional independence. Yet these reforms unfold within political economies structured by patronage, elite bargaining, and informal protection networks. Resistance therefore takes adaptive rather than overt forms: legal obstruction, selective compliance, and politicised enforcement. At the same time, civic tech initiatives designed to democratise accountability often remain weakly embedded in state systems, limiting their capacity to trigger enforcement. The resulting disconnect between bottom-up transparency and top-down sanctioning reveals a structural tension between technocratic integrity reforms and the realities of competitive political struggle.

In the domain of human rights and equality, initiatives such as Med Dialogue for Rights and Equality and the International Accountability Platform for Belarus reflect a growing reliance on civil society as the primary carrier of democratic accountability. These programmes expand participation, strengthen advocacy capacity, and support documentation of grave abuses. Yet they also expose a central paradox: rights promotion increasingly advances “around” the state in contexts where state institutions themselves constitute the primary barriers to rights realisation. Structured dialogues generate platforms for engagement but lack coercive leverage, while professionalised NGOs risk social detachment from broader popular constituencies. At the same time, regimes are learning to selectively tolerate rights-based activism within tightly managed boundaries, while repressing actors that challenge core power structures.

Beyond the internal dynamics of each sector, several cross-cutting constraints systematically shape the EU's capacity to counter autocratisation. A central contradiction lies in the persistent gap between normativity and pragmatism: while the EU formally upholds liberal democratic values, it simultaneously engages in transactional arrangements, on migration, energy, and security, that undermine the credibility of conditionality and dilute normative leverage. Institutional embedding remains fragile not only because of technical fragmentation, but also because of regime incentives to absorb EU instruments without conceding political control. Across sectors, the securitisation of civil space has emerged as a recurrent pattern, with EU initiatives privileging compliant intermediaries and unintentionally narrowing pluralism. Finally, the EU's preference for stability over *dissensus* continues to favour technocratic risk management over political confrontation, thereby limiting its capacity to engage with the very conflicts over legitimacy, identity, and sovereignty that drive autocratisation.

5. Conclusion

This report has shown that the EU has significantly expanded and diversified its toolbox to counter autocratisation across the European Neighbourhood. From P/CVE and counter disinformation to anticorruption, civic tech, and human rights initiatives, the range of instruments is broader, more socially embedded, and more technically complex than in previous phases of the ENP. Yet, across all sectors, a recurrent limitation emerges: the EU engagement continues to operate with a constrained understanding of political conflict, one that prioritises stability, risk management, and procedural inclusion while remaining structurally uneasy with dissent as a constitutive feature of democratic life.

Dissensus, understood not as a pathology to be neutralised but as an expression of competing claims to legitimacy, justice, identity and power, has been a central driver of political mobilisation across the Neighbourhood. It animates struggles over sovereignty, gender, class, religion and geopolitics. However, EU interventions often seek to manage these conflicts through technocratic solutions, dialogue platforms, or resilience frameworks that aim to reduce friction rather than engage with them politically. As a result, contestations are frequently displaced into the margins of implementation, where they re-emerge in the form of elite resistance, civil society fragmentation, regime co-optation, and widespread mistrust.

The case studies demonstrate that autocratisation does not advance through the simple erosion of institutional capacity but through the strategic reorganisation of dissensus itself. Authoritarian and hybrid regimes increasingly absorb the language of participation, resilience, human rights and anticorruption while enclosing the political space in which genuine opposition, ideological competition and redistribution conflict can occur. In this context, the EU emphasis on procedural reform and depoliticised participation risks reinforcing a form of “managed pluralism: where disagreement is tolerated only insofar as it does not threaten core power structures.

At the same time, EU instruments that rely heavily on civil society and digital participation place growing burdens on individuals and organisations operating under conditions of repression, surveillance and economic precarity. When dissensus is displaced from institutions to communities, activities, and NGOs, without corresponding shifts in power and protection, it becomes socially costly and politically isolating. The dynamic risks transforming dissent from a driver of political renewal into a source of exhaustion, vulnerability, and selective participation.

In this sense, dissensus must be re-centred not as a risk to be contained but also as a reality that can be politically engaged. It also demands confronting conflict further than technical inclusion, and confronting the political economy of repression, informal architectures of power and legitimacy of claims of authoritarian and illiberal actors, rather than operating around the. The tension identified in this report between pragmatism and normativity, stability and pluralism, and resilience and contestation reflect the EU's own dynamic position as both a normative power and a geopolitical actor.