



SOUTH-EAST EUROPE PROGRAMME

The geopolitics of EU democracy promotion 2030: Voices from the EU neighbourhood

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Introduction to the EMBRACE project

The EMBRACE research project (2022-25) collects evidence-based knowledge on the obstacles to democratisation and ways to overcome them in five regions of the European neighbourhood: Southern Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, Middle East and North Africa. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and pro-democracy forces to develop effective strategies to promote democratic progress in the European neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, new policy tools for EUDP practitioners and pro-democracy activists are developed based on the project's findings.

The EMBRACE consortium consists of 14 partner organisations based in 13 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development.

Empirical data was gathered in twelve case study countries through a variety of research approaches, investigating episodes of political closure and opening to identify, analyse and explain behavioural, institutional and structural blockages, and the conditions under which they can be overcome. A new quantitative dataset was generated on the larger trends of EU Democracy Promotion and its effects on democratisation over the last two decades in all 23 neighbours.

The research is structured around four thematic clusters: the re-configurations for democratic policy shifts after popular uprisings; democratisation and economic modernisation in authoritarian and hybrid regimes; the nexus between democratisation and peace; and the geopolitics of EUDP and the competition that the EU encounters in its democracy promotion efforts.



Introduction to this Policy Brief

EU democracy promotion in its neighbourhood must grapple with the turbulent reality of our times and the uncertainty it raises for the future. Ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have intensified in the last year and are largely determined by the Trump administration's stated (and according to many, ill-conceived) ambition to pursue quick and pragmatic solutions. In parallel, protests in Georgia and Serbia contest governmental authoritarian tendencies and demand respect for the rule of law. This volatile and erratic global landscape is exacerbated by the increasing influence and disinformation campaigns by external actors (notably Russia and China), on the one hand, and growing polarisation and populism in the EU's neighbourhood (in addition to inside its own borders), on the other. Many have argued that there is a correlation – even causation – between these two elements. Most concur that the ultimate result has been that democratic processes in the EU neighbourhood are hindered at best or reversed at worse (Manfredi Sánchez 2025, Clarke 2024, Rumera 2021).

Against this backdrop, workshops in North Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine and Georgia, as well as interviews on Algeria, all with local stakeholders, sought to project the likelihood of scenarios on EU democracy promotion in its neighbourhood¹. A twofold objective was set: first, to explore the democratic performance of each country and the potential risks to its democratic performance by 2030; and second, to examine what role the EU could play to mitigate the obstacles to democracy and strengthen its enablers. This briefing provides a comparative discussion of the results from these five workshops and draws recommendations for the EU to better navigate the complexities and challenges in democracy promotion efforts in its neighbourhood.

A word on methodology and limitations

The out-of-the-box brainstorming engaged local stakeholders from different walks of life – academia, research, think tanks, NGOs, business and trade associations, the media, government officials and opposition parties – in each North Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine and Georgia.² Designed as an open, creative discussion rather than a rigid scientific study, the workshops encouraged diverse ideas, recorded anonymously to foster uninhibited participation. It is argued that participants feel empowered and as a result, they innovate and diversify their choices with alternative perspectives (UNESCO 2023). Limitations faced, including divergence in participation, time constraints and lack of knowledge of foresight

¹ The workshops were organised by Ilia State University (ILIAUNI), in Tbilisi, Georgia; the Ukrainian European Studies Association (UESA), in Kyiv, Ukraine (online); the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Serbia, in Belgrade; and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), in Athens, Greece (on North Macedonia, in Skopje). It was not possible to organise a workshop on Algeria, but the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), in Paris, conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews that are used in this briefing as a control mechanism to enhance research validity. The author wishes to thank the researchers who organised and conducted the workshops and interviews and the stakeholders who participated in this exercise for their valuable insights and time.

² Given the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine and the high insecurity in the country, the workshop on Ukraine was organised online. That also provided the opportunity to tap into the Ukrainian refugee community living in the EU, particularly in Germany.

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methodologies in the EU neighbourhood, meant that the scenario-building exercise took diverse forms.³ That ultimately affected the quality of data collected and the subsequent analysis.

In a prospectivist iterative process, participants identified, delved into and debated possible and probable triggers and trends linked to EU democracy promotion in a time horizon of five years (EU2030) and organised them in terms of probability and impact.⁴ The initial task was to collect as many insights as possible (on post-it cards; see Figure 1), without filtering or judging the collected data. Participants scanned the horizon for trends, events, and issues that could affect EU democracy promotion by 2030. A 360-degree perspective of the drivers of change is key to understanding the local, regional and global context (zooming out of the policy of EU democracy promotion per se), as well as considering the internal and external factors affecting the EU neighbourhood.

Participants then sorted the triggers into security, social, economic, political, and technological categories (some even examining triggers on climate) to map the broader context shaping the future of EU democracy promotion in their respective countries.⁵ (see Figure 1.) The aim was to create a manageable and meaningful set of clusters or categories that capture the main drivers. That allowed for the identification of new emerging trends and potential disruptions that could strengthen or undermine democracy in each of the countries studied. Finally, participants in each workshop drew a two-dimensional matrix, with axes representing plausibility (realistic to improbable) and impact on democratic performance within the five-year timeframe (high to low) on which they plotted the trends identified (Stucki 2023, Gall et al. 2022, Dragicevic 2017). The objective was to understand what could change and what the impact on democratic performance in the EU neighbourhood would be should they occur.

³ There were 12 participants (4 women) in the workshop in Skopje, 4 (no women) in Belgrade, 14 in Georgia (5 women), 11 (3 women) for Ukraine and 2 interviewees on Algeria. The number of participants in the workshops and gender equality was affected in certain countries by the political difficulties on the ground, namely the protests in Serbia and Georgia and the war in Ukraine.

⁴ The workshops were conducted in the local languages in each Serbia, North Macedonia, Ukraine and Georgia, and in French for Algeria. The identified participants also had to at least understand English, as some of the background material sent to them was in English.

⁵ The workshops on Georgia and Ukraine also included climate change as one of the categories, as Figure 1 shows

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Figure 1: Mapping drivers and trends on EU democracy promotion in Ukraine



Triggers and trends across the EU neighborhood

The brainstorming exercises highlight that North Macedonia, Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Algeria are all experiencing the same trends as the EU, but in an amplified manner and under disadvantaged conditions. As is the EU, the neighbourhood too is feeling the impact of a changing global order and the erosion of the international rules-based order; the accelerating and worsening impacts of climate change and environmental degradation; the accelerating technological change; the increasing demographic pressure and widening inequalities; and the threats to democracy -- all trends outlined in the European Commission's latest Strategic Foresight Report (European Commission 2025). In that sense, there is a continuum on global trends between the internal and the external that also illustrates the porosity of borders.

Several similar patterns emerge among the triggers across the four countries that are on the path to EU accession: North Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia. These similarities underscore how regional and global dynamics intersect with each country's internal political challenges, shaping their democratic trajectories, their far-reaching consequences for democratic governance, regional stability, and the influence that external actors have on these countries. For the EU it means that it can have some influence

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through its enlargement policy and the required legislative approximation to the EU *acquis communautaire*. The EU does not and cannot have the same leverage in the EU neighbourhood countries that are not on the accession path, as the Algerian case shows.

A macro-analysis of the triggers and trends on EU democracy promotion in its neighbourhood highlights key unintended consequences, which could continue to be obstacles to moving towards democracy in the future. A recurring transversal theme in all the workshops is the **trade-off between stability versus democracy**. This dichotomy between ensuring stability and promoting democracy manifests itself in a tension between state control and individual freedoms, between top-down and bottom-up approaches to governance, between ensuring security and safeguarding the respect for human rights, and between protecting perceived national interests and meeting required reforms in the context of international cooperation. In Serbia, for example, the EU's prioritisation of stability over democracy (stabilitocracy) is seen as a concern that may allow authoritarian tendencies to persist. In North Macedonia, the EU's approach is described as "saving the furniture" (i.e. maintaining the status quo) rather than promoting democratisation, suggesting that there too, stability is prioritised over democratic reforms. Unsurprisingly, in Ukraine, where a war is raging, the significant security threats and instability constitute key challenges to promoting democracy. While the EU's support for Ukraine's democratisation is seen as crucial, the EU's own stability and security concerns are seen as possibly taking precedence over democratic values. Similarly, in Georgia, the EU is perceived as following the same approach, even when democratic reforms are necessary to ensure long-term stability. In comparison, in Algeria, this same EU approach of focusing on stability and counterterrorism has helped consolidate the Algerian regime's control and has in parallel led to the suppression of civil society.

The dichotomy between **short-term gains vs. long-term sustainability** is also a common theme across the EU neighbourhood. This dichotomy refers to the trade-off between, on the one hand, achieving short-term benefits, such as economic benefits or political stability, and, on the other, investing in long-term sustainability, such as democratic institutions, human capital, and environmental protection. This tension is often driven by political and economic pressures: the need to maintain power, attract foreign investment, or address immediate security concerns. In Serbia, for example, the government's focus on short-term economic gains has come at the expense of long-term sustainability, with corruption and cronyism undermining the country's economic and political stability. Georgia's economic growth has been driven by short-term investments, rather than long-term strategic planning, which has led to concerns about the country's economic sustainability. In North Macedonia, the country's EU integration process has been driven by short-term political considerations, rather than a long-term commitment to democratic values and institutional development. Similarly, in Ukraine, the tension between short-term political gains and long-term institutional development has implied that Ukrainian political leaders often prioritise short-term advantages over long-term reforms.

These dichotomies are not mutually exclusive as the tension between balancing nationalist feelings and perceived interests, on the one hand, with international cooperation, on the other, shows. This is particularly evident in Serbia, Georgia and Algeria where those in power walk a tightrope when trying to balance their relationships with (and the influence from) Western countries and non-Western countries, such as Russia and China.

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When one delves into the details of stakeholders' concerns across the case studies, a more nuanced picture emerges showing that each country's unique economic, political, technological, geopolitical, security, and social triggers is variably affected by the global trends. Similar triggers weigh differently in different countries and can even spill over into other domains of the socio-political and economic development of a country. A notable example is the Lithium project in Serbia, which is at the same time seen as a project for economic well-being, a geopolitical contest between the EU and China, and a potential bargaining chip for the negotiations on the Kosovo status (thus, a security token). It is also simultaneously an incentive for democratisation (through protests) and a trigger for the backsliding of democratisation (in the EU's balancing act to secure economic interests). As the analysis below shows, while energy programmes are perceived as having been politicised in Serbia, in North Macedonia, which is suffering from economic stagnation, the emphasis on foreign investment and energy programmes is rather seen as a way to jump start the economy.

The four countries wrestle with the **EU's role and influence in democratisation reforms and the finalité of EU accession**. Serbia, North Macedonia, Georgia and Ukraine all face challenges related to the EU's readiness to concretely integrate new members, struggle with public trust and buy-in, which has direct effects on pushing forward with democratic alignment. The EU is seen as both a facilitator of reforms and a potential source of geopolitical tension (e.g., Bulgaria's veto impacting on the EU's credibility in North Macedonia). Ukrainian participants noted that the "traditional" EU accession process is ill-suited for Ukraine's wartime and post-war needs, complicating democratic and economic reforms. Linked to that, **declining trust in the EU** is also a shared concern. North Macedonia and Serbia face public disillusionment with EU integration, while Georgia and Ukraine grapple with societal readiness for reforms and potential backlash against unmet expectations. In that context, direct relations with the EU Member States are increasingly important -- a trend that is likely to continue. For some (notably North Macedonia), however, "bilateralisation" has been particularly obstructive (notably its relations with Bulgaria). In terms of security, only Ukraine pointed to the importance of steadfastly maintaining focus on democratic security rather than shifting to economic security. It is also the only country that saw itself playing an active role in the EU's defence architecture, outrightly calling for the Ukrainian Army to act as a cornerstone of EU capabilities.

For the candidate countries, **putting an end to Russia's aggression against Ukraine** is a key trigger. For Serbia and North Macedonia, regional stability and EU integration are contingent on the war's outcome. The four candidate countries also face **external pressures from Russian influence**, including hybrid warfare, disinformation (e.g., 5G networks in Serbia), and political interference. Russian disinformation is seen as exploiting religious and cultural ties (e.g. through the Orthodox Church in North Macedonia and Serbia), while Ukraine faces AI-driven cognitive warfare, and Georgia is destabilised by Russian propaganda. Russia's influence in Serbia also spreads its tentacles through financially attractive energy (gas) projects. **China** is also seen as holding potential economic leverage, particularly through infrastructure projects and loans. China's intentions are sometimes camouflaged, as in the case of North Macedonia, where a Hungarian loan to the country is secured through a consortium of Chinese banks. Moreover, China hides behind Hungary when influencing tech projects (5G technology). A reorientation of Georgia's economic ties towards authoritarian states like Russia and China could undermine democratic values and increase dependency.

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Western actors' influence in the political realities of the EU neighbourhood is another common element surfacing in the workshops conducted. The United States' potential political shifts (e.g., a Trump administration) could (and is) impact(ing) Georgia and Ukraine. How the United States leverages China (with the US-China relationship expected to become increasingly hostile) will also affect Serbia's and North Macedonia's level of engagement with China. NATO's role in countering Russian influence is emphasised in North Macedonia's case, while the EU's geopolitical priorities affect all candidate countries. For all case studies, the role of the EU and its ability to support democratic reforms and counterbalance external influences is a crucial factor. In that respect, Serbian President Alexander Vucic "speaks Russia and China, but does EU". However, as surfaced in the discussions on Ukraine, declining trust in Western institutions, despite support for EU/NATO integration, may fuel anti-Western sentiments in Ukraine, complicating alignment with Western democratic values. Equally, in Georgia, strained ties with Western partners, including the EU and NATO, may reduce support for democratic reforms and economic aid. Algeria's case, a country with no EU accession perspective and outside NATO, is particular: the EU is seen as an interlocutor because of its geographic proximity, with a different role from Russia, which is active in the arms trade, and China, whose role seems unclear (even if relations are cordial).

The challenges to the EU democracy promotion are similar in all five cases examined and manifest themselves as persisting corruption, media capture, and authoritarian tendencies. It has led to a decline in trust in the institutions of the countries examined, with a "decline of democratic resilience" felt in North Macedonia and Serbia. Serbia's government is criticised for institutional dysfunction and reliance on organised crime, while North Macedonia and particularly Georgia face oligarchic influence and political repression. The trend is rather shifting to a possible strengthening of authoritarian-like political parties in the mid- to long-term. In Georgia, participants observe the merging of state institutions with the ruling party, leading to the appropriation of state resources for partisan ends, which undermines fair political competition. Moreover, a preference for traditional values (through the growing role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in public life) over liberal values may result in resistance to reforms that promote inclusivity and individual freedoms. In Serbia, society is polarised and media is government-controlled. Incremental change through small democratic steps (i.e. citizens' resistance) is seen as improbable. As political opposition is "disorganised", only violence could bring change in Serbia or there will not be any change at all (because organised local non-governmental actors cannot be effective). While admittedly the ongoing war puts Ukraine in a particular situation, the country also struggles with institutional weaknesses and faulty anti-corruption efforts. There is growing distrust in democratic institutions, particularly among Ukrainian youth, which risks weakening faith in democracy as a governance system, threatening long-term democratic performance. In Algeria too, strong government repression on media, civil society, and political opposition hinder moves towards democratisation.

Equally, **economic triggers (albeit acting distinctively), fostered by Russia and China**, in the four candidate countries have led to brain drain coupled with foreign dependency are recurring themes. The exodus of skilled workers from public institutions weakens governance capacity and reform efforts. Moreover, economic inequality and a weak middle class restrict the societal base for democratic activism and reform, as noted in Georgia. North Macedonia struggles with emigration and poverty, with a weak SME sector, while Russian energy (gas) projects that could potentially boost the economy are not perceived favourably. In Serbia, while large economic projects have attracted foreign investment, they

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have not translated into trust in future economic prosperity as they are perceived as being linked to short-term governmental gains through cronyism, patronage, and corruption. This situation, in addition to inflation and low salaries, leads to brain drain and emigration from Serbia. Ukraine is also facing the consequences of "friendshoring", the prioritisation of economic ties with political elites, which is seen as affecting its democratic economic policies. Georgia's political economy is shaped by oligarchs, and Ukraine's post-war recovery hinges on economic stability. Russian and Chinese economic leverage could potentially increase in the future. This is also dependent on how the United States chooses to deal with especially China. These developments continue in cognisance of the climate crisis and the unpreparedness of the private sector to implement any of the EU green legislation in the coming years, including CBAM when it is implemented.⁶

Emerging scenarios on EU democracy promotion in the neighbourhood

This section presents scenarios emerging from the most plausible and impactful trends in the next five years for the four candidate countries examined (North Macedonia, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine).⁷ Stakeholders in all four workshops highlighted the potential of the EU for countering democratic backsliding. As a Serbian expert distinctly put it, "We are lucky because we are in Europe, which means that there is pressure from the European Commission".

Regarding **North Macedonia**, it is highly likely that stagnating economic growth (or even degrowth) persists because of a lack of innovation in local business. The impact would be high because economic grievances are easily exploited and provide fertile ground for citizens to be manipulated. In this context, it is highly likely that Chinese companies and import of Chinese products would expand in the Macedonian market and have some impact. It is highly likely that economic stagnation will continue to push emigration and aggravate brain drain, which will have a high impact on democracy promotion. In terms of governance and political allegiances, a move even more to the fringes of the political spectrum, with authoritarian populist forces consolidating and political polarisation increasing, is relatively likely. If political tendencies take such a turn, the impact will be high. Several spoilers are highly likely to play a detrimental role on EU democracy promotion and have high impact: no matter the scenarios, Russia will continue to disrupt EU democracy promotion and hybrid warfare will continue. It will also use its local allies in the region, specifically Serbia as a hub for disinformation activity. It is also highly likely that North Macedonia will build a closer relationship with Hungary, which would have a high negative impact on the EU's democracy promotion efforts. In parallel, it is highly likely that trust in the EU will continue to decline, which would also be highly impactful. Albania's accession to the EU would affect North Macedonia strongly: it could

⁶ The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) refers to a policy that places a carbon price on imported goods in carbon-intensive sectors, such as cement, electricity, and steel, to mirror the EU's Emissions Trading System (ETS). It was introduced as part of the European Green Deal and entered its transitional phase in October 2023. It will become fully operational in January 2026. The goal is to prevent "carbon leakage" by discouraging the relocation of production outside the EU and encouraging global decarbonization, while ensuring fair competition for EU-based industries.

⁷ The brainstorming on Algeria did not discuss scenarios or future plausible trajectories, so Algeria is left out of this part of the analysis.

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help reverse the trend of mistrust towards the EU but could also just reinforce it if all other variables remained unchanged.

Regarding **Serbia**, participants in the workshop classified all trends identified as moderately or highly impactful. Among them, persistent organised crime and the EU's prioritisation of geopolitics and its own interests are seen as being the most likely factors and as having the most (negative) impact on EU democracy promotion. Increasing corruption, pro-Russia and pro-China propaganda, Montenegro joining the EU, and the non-resolution of the Kosovo issue are also seen as highly likely but as having moderate impact on EU democracy promotion. Challenges to Serbian democracy are seen as persisting in the coming years. In particular, local stakeholders considered the perspective of the Serbian government losing support, media freedom and opposition consolidating, and the EU doing more to advance the fight against corruption as either moderately or highly impactful. At the same time however, these trends were seen as rather unlikely to materialise.

Regarding **Ukraine**, local stakeholders considered most of the potential triggers to be in the middle range of impact on Ukrainian democracy with four specific trends having potentially the highest impact. First, a potential collapse or significant weakening of the EU, disrupting Ukraine's integration aspirations, was described as low probability but high impact, as it could lead to regional instability, reduced support for Ukraine, and a shift towards alternative geopolitical alignments, undermining democratic progress. Second, a potential global agreement to regulate artificial intelligence, possibly restricting its use in political or electoral processes, was noted as having high impact on Ukrainian democracy due to AI's potential to influence voter behaviour, but low probability due to the complexity of achieving global consensus. This could potentially limit external interference in Ukraine's democratic processes in the next five years. Thirdly, the need to rebuild Ukraine's democratic institutions post-war and meet Copenhagen criteria (e.g., stable democracy, rule of law) is rated as unlikely but would be highly impactful, as EU accession would enhance democratic performance. One of the major challenges after the end of the war with Russia will be to reintegrate Ukrainian war veterans into the demanding process of EU accession. War veterans are seen as constituting a leading political force in Ukraine after the war. However, EU delays in moving ahead with Ukraine's EU accession could erode Ukrainian trust in democratic integration, impacting societal trust in democratic institutions, feeding resistance to EU institutional changes and potentially fuelling anti-Western sentiments. Fourthly, a Ukrainian victory in the ongoing conflict was assessed as moderately probable with high impact on democratic performance, potentially strengthening national unity and resilience, but risking negative sentiments, such as frustration if victory fails to deliver justice or economic stability, challenging democratic governance.

Stakeholders in **Georgia** noted two highly likely and potentially highly impactful inter-connected trends. First, at a geopolitical level, a weakening Western security alliance (either the United States leaving NATO or a collapse of EU-US cooperation) could embolden Russia to exert greater influence over Georgia and potentially undermine its democratic institutions. A Russian victory in Ukraine could embolden Moscow to pressure Georgia, stifling democratic reforms and reinforcing authoritarian tendencies, while Russian President Putin's death could lead to Russian instability or a power shift, either easing pressure on Georgia's democracy or intensifying Russian interference. A robust EU-China alliance could shift EU priorities away from Georgia, reducing democratic support and leaving it susceptible to Russian influence. Second, in terms of social trends, ceasing Western funding for Georgian media could weaken independent

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journalism, reducing democratic accountability and increasing susceptibility to propaganda. Linked to that, AI-driven propaganda could manipulate public opinion in Georgia, undermining democratic discourse and strengthening anti-Western narratives. Growing anti-Western attitudes in Georgia could weaken public support for democratic reforms, closely aligning the country closer with authoritarian powers. Interestingly, economic trends figure as moderately impactful in the Georgian discussion: an economic downturn could fuel public discontent, potentially undermining democratic governance or strengthening populist and authoritarian forces.

Figure 2: Impact-Likelihood matrix from the workshop in Georgia



Conclusions and emerging recommendations

Four common recommendations arise from the discussions in Serbia, Ukraine, North Macedonia, Georgia and, to a lesser degree, on Algeria. They highlight the importance of a comprehensive and coordinated EU approach to promoting democratic development and stability in its neighbourhood.

1. **Bigger EU support and engagement in the neighbourhood:** Apart from Algeria, the other four cases demonstrate that the EU must increase its support and engagement in its neighbourhood in three key areas: democratic development, rule of law, and economic growth. Nevertheless, discussions on all five countries, including Algeria, emphasise the need for increased international support and engagement for democratic change to come about.

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- 2. Fighting corruption and promoting rule of law:** Eliminating corruption and strengthening the rule of law is emphasised in all countries examined to ensure democratic governance. More specifically, supporting and advocating for media freedom and independence is key in all five countries to counter disinformation and promote democratic discourse, as is supporting institutional capacity-building. Moreover, the need to support education and critical thinking is highlighted in the four candidate countries to promote democratic values and counter disinformation. On Ukraine, it was argued that the focus should be on integrating veterans with EU funding, to steer them away from far-right agendas. On Georgia, sustaining existing sanctions and introducing targeted personal sanctions against anti-Western and anti-democratic oligarchs, such as Bidzina Ivanishvili and his inner circle, is key. Timing is critical to maximise impact, especially in the context of snap elections or political scandals.
- 3. Strengthening civil society and NGOs:** Non-governmental actors are seen as crucial actors in promoting democratic changes and holding governments accountable. In that context, encouraging people-to-people contacts and exchanges is recommended in the four candidate countries to promote mutual understanding and cooperation. In Algeria and Serbia expectations are low as the EU is seen as having been ineffective -- in Serbia, as having "turned a blind eye to democratic backsliding". Thus, while in North Macedonia, Georgia and Ukraine, the EU could promote democracy by facilitating the empowerment of civil society and strengthening civil society oversight of government, in Algeria and Serbia civil society is seen as unable to play its true role as an agent of change.
- 4. Promoting economic development and cooperation:** Promoting economic development and cooperation is recommended in the four candidate countries to ensure stability and prosperity. The geopolitical circumstances make the move to nearshoring evident. That would entail creating incentives for countries in the EU neighbourhood to choose the EU single market and therefore counter Russian and Chinese influence and loans.

Against this backdrop and based on the data collected during the scenario-building brainstorming on North Macedonia, Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and to a limited degree on Algeria, the following table illustrates the role the EU could play in mitigating risks and leveraging opportunities for democracy promotion in its neighbourhood.

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Table 1: EU action for strengthening democracy promotion in its neighbourhood

Focus area	Action required	Potential benefits
Foster multilateralism and the respect for universal human rights (and by extension EU values of democracy)	Strengthen EU cohesion and counter external coercion; counter hybrid war through education and awareness campaigns; ensure that the Ukrainian army acts as a cornerstone of EU capabilities	Increased leverage power at global level and resilience to external pressure; reinforced commitment to Ukraine's independence; regional stability preserved (restored)
Focus on connectivity and big tech regulation	Enforce social media accountability and combat misinformation	Reduced political interference, media freedom and freedom of speech reinforced, societal resilience reinforced
Provide long-term funding on democracy	Move away from short-lived reform projects and invest in social growth; provide more funding for civil society that allows for broad-based reforms; expands funding to a larger spectrum of civil society actors	Ensure democratisation and rule of law reforms are sustainable and that change is consolidated; local agents of change strengthened
Play a stronger role in conflict resolution and mediation	Democratising Serbia and resolving the Kosovo status question is crucial for democratisation in the entire Western Balkans; commitment to Ukraine's defence	Resolved border questions (Kosovo, Bulgaria-North Macedonia), focus on democratic security rather than economic security in Ukraine, ensure political stability in Georgia
Forcefully support the fight against corruption and cronyism, capture of media and rule of law institutions	Supporting politically and financially the agents of change (NGOs, civil society, youth, opposition parties, veterans (in Ukraine specifically))	Public dissatisfaction tackled, pro-Russian and pro-Chinese propaganda countered, pluralism promoted, polarisation countered, societal resilience boosted, and by extension EU credibility reinvigorated

The diversity of concerns expressed in the scenario-building brainstorming in each North Macedonia, Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, as well as the interviews on Algeria, points to the strong specificity of needs and demands in the EU neighbourhood. While there are clear common concerns – notably the sprawling

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corruption, economic capture by elitist private or governmental actors, the politicisation of the environmental crisis –, there are also large variations in the anxieties and apprehensions and the level of concern across the countries examined regarding the obstacles to democracy (promotion). The absence of a clear and coherent vision of the future of democratic transition, economic modernisation and the future of the security architecture in the EU speaks for the need for the creation of an EU Toolkit that draws on the means to respond to the real and concrete requests from societies in the neighbourhood within a reasonable time horizon. A linear set of instruments following a standardised method cannot meet such ambitions. This Toolbox must also be part of a medium-term strategic vision that must be clearly explained and shared by all partner states and especially societies. The building blocks and conditions for an EU Toolkit for policymakers on EU democracy promotion in the neighbourhood are explored in a separate briefing (Ioannides 2025).

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