D3.1 Key concepts

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101132314

Democracy and trust, hybrid regimes and resilience

Project acronym:	RE-ENGAGE
Project full title:	Re-Engaging with Neighbours in a State of War and Geopolitical Tensions
Grant agreement no.:	101132314
Type of action:	HORIZON-RIA
Project start date:	1 January 2024
Project duration:	36 months
Call topic:	HORIZON-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01
Project website:	https://re-engaging.eu/
Document:	Paper
Deliverable number:	D3.1
Deliverable title:	Key concepts
Due date of deliverable:	31 March 2024
Actual submission date:	26 March 2024
Editors:	Morten Bøås
Authors:	Morten Bøås, Mathilde Tomine Eriksdatter Giske og Kari Osland
Reviewers:	Pernille Rieker og Marianne Riddervold
Participating beneficiaries:	Whole RE-ENGAGE Consortium
Work Package no.:	WP3
Work Package title:	Concepts and Methods
Work Package leader:	Morten Bøås
Work Package participants:	NUPI, ECFR, IIR, CAS, SSA, LU
Estimated person-months for deliverable:	2
Dissemination level:	PU
Nature:	Demonstrator
Version:	1
Draft/Final:	Final
No of pages (including cover):	25
Keywords:	Democracy, trust, hybrid regimes, resilience

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WORKING PAPER

D3.1 Key concepts: Democracy and trust, hybrid regimes and resilience

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26 March 2024

SUMMARY

This paper conducts the initial conceptualisation of the key analytical concepts of democracy, trust, hybrid regimes, and resilience. Our analytical starting point is that we must understand the level of hybridity and the degrees of horizontal and vertical trust in a society to know which means are needed to reduce the room for manoeuvre enjoyed by negative internal and external influences in obstructing the EU's democracy promotion efforts. We argue that such an approach may improve our understanding of the variation in the level of success of EU democracy promotion efforts in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans, as well as of how to increase the likelihood of success, moving forward.

We assume that a key requirement for a resilient society is democracy built on transparent and credible elections that legitimately produce winners and losers. However, while this is a necessary condition for a resilient democratic society, it is not sufficient, as democracy must be much more than elections and some basic political rights; it must also produce security in the wider understanding, in the form of physical protection from harm and violence, as well as security in the form of economic safety, well-being, and the promise of a future where the population can thrive economically.

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Introduction

This paper is the first in a trio of working papers that will establish the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological framework for the EU Re-engage project. This first paper will conduct the initial conceptualisation of the key analytical concepts of democracy, trust, hybrid regimes, and resilience, while the second and third papers will chart the relationship between theory and methods, and how this will be operationalised in the data gathering (i.e., the field manual). This trio of papers will have the status as 'living' documents, meaning they will be revised, refined, and republished as the project evolves, and as concept and theory meets the empirical reality in the case countries. In addition to offering analytical, conceptual, and methodological guidance to the project's empirical inquiries, the combined work of these papers will be published as a stand-alone academic article.

We assume that a key requirement for a resilient society is democracy built on transparent and credible elections that legitimately produce winners and losers, meaning that winners respect the rights and views of the losing side, while those that lost acknowledge defeat and take the role of a constructive opposition. However, while this is a necessary condition for a resilient democratic society, it is not sufficient. This is because democracy must be much more than elections and some basic political rights; it must also produce security in the wider understanding. That is, security in the form of physical protection from harm and violence, as well as security in the form of economic safety, well-being, and the promise of a future where the population can thrive economically. In other words, the majority of the population must believe that as a system of rule, democracy takes care of them and protects them from corporal harm, threats to their properties, and gives them a sense of economic safety, and thereby, a degree of hope for even a better life in the future under this type of political rule.

This must be the foundation for resilient societies in the European Union (EU). We also assume that increased societal resilience in the EU's neighbouring countries (in this case the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans) will increase the resilience of the extended European community. This is important, especially in a context of increased geopolitical tensions that plays out as hybrid info-wars. We therefore assume that less resilient states and societies are more susceptible to negative external and internal influence, and that part of this susceptibility stems from low degrees of trust, both horizontal between various segments of the population, and vertical between population groups and political elites/the system,

as well as flawed state institutions. The result will be a democratic system that fails to deliver both credible elections and security to its population, consequently decreasing the popular support for democracy as the preferred system of rule.

No political system is completely ideal-typical. That is the case for democracy as well for any other system of rule. Pulled by the weight of history and various path dependencies, all political systems are hybrid versions of what they are formally supposed to be. Our analytical starting point is, therefore, that we must understand the level of hybridity and the degrees of horizontal and vertical trust in a society to know which means are needed to reduce the room for manoeuvre enjoyed by negative internal and external influences in obstructing the EU's democracy promotion efforts. We argue that such an approach may improve our understanding of the variation in the level of success of EU democracy promotion efforts in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans (Richter and Wunsch 2020), as well as of how to increase the likelihood of success, moving forward.

In what follows, we will first dig deeper into the topics of democracy, democratisation, and democracy promotion. We will then explore the concept of hybridity, as well as horizontal and vertical trust, before turning to the concept of resilience. We will end by pointing out the multiversal connectivities that exists between these concepts.

Democracy, democratisation, and democracy promotion

In popular parlour, democracy is usually understood minimally as a way of ruling where the leader is elected through free and fair elections. The idea is that holding elections is a magical wand that, once yielded, will be sufficient to channel public will into the political system and give elected leaders the legitimacy needed (Schmitter and Karl 1991). However, as research has shown, elections are not sufficient for a regime to be referred to as democratic. There are ways in which elections can be orchestrated, such as the phenomenon of gerrymandering, implying rigging electoral districts to ensure re-election. Furthermore, autocrats are also holding elections while their regimes remain steadfastly authoritarian (Guriev and Treisman 2023) – this fallacy has come to be known as 'electoralism' (Morgenbesser 2014) or 'authoritarian electoralism' (Bøås 2015). However, this fallacy is still up for debate, as it has been argued that holding elections, regardless of being free and fair, could positively impact regimes regarding democratisation in

the future (Lindberg 2006). The first elections under Jerry Rawling's rule in Ghana can be argued to have had such an effect, and a similar analysis can be attached to the evolution of democracy in South Korea.

Our understanding of democracy, therefore, builds on Robert Dahl's work on polyarchy (1971; 1989; 1998) and sees universal suffrage, officials elected in free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, the availability of alternative sources of information, and freedom of speech and associations as necessary conditions for democratic rule. These are necessary conditions as robust research has demonstrated a general trend where the quality of government and thereby governance is positively correlated with the level of democracy (Charron and Lapuente 2010). Measures of governance include accountability, rule of law, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory control, and control of corruption (Kaufmann and Kraay 2023).

Importantly, however, democracy as a system of rule must also, in order to achieve legitimacy among its citizens, deliver basic security in addition to jobs, predictable livelihoods, and inclusive economic growth. This is key if democracy is to become resilient against attempts to undermine it as a system of rule. A state that is unable or unwilling to deliver such basic services, either to the population at large or to parts of the population, is a more fragile state. This means that while free and fair elections and freedom of speech and association are necessary conditions, they are in themselves not sufficient for democracy to thrive and create resilient societies. Thus, what happens after an elected leader takes office is equally as, if not more, important. Like any other system of rule, the population's living conditions must, at the very least, not deteriorate if it is to remain legitimate. In other words, the institutions themselves are not the only thing that matters – the quality of government they produce is even more crucial.

This approach to democracy is built on two parameters. The first concerns feelings of safety, both physical and economic. The other relates to the population's prospects of the future. Integral to the essence of democracy is the idea that the future will be brighter: tomorrow will be better than today – this is essential to maintain optimism in the population. For citizens, this is related to a sense of stability and that the government delivers on its promises and assumes the form of impartiality, rule of law, and economic policies that spur growth. When the democratic system delivers on its promises, popular support for democracy will almost always rise. When the democratic system does not deliver; when people are not seeing improvements in living conditions or security; when democracy has not

given them more than the right to vote every now and then on candidates that they see as corrupt, elitist, or simply useless, citizens may start to look elsewhere for alternative ways of governing. They may look for other modes of rule to supply the services needed. Consequently, the public's support for democracy and the system as a whole and ability to resist external influences is tied to the effectiveness and inclusiveness of the state.

A well-functioning democracy thus fosters trust to the system. It is this that has been labelled as 'good governance' or 'output legitimacy', which refers to the quality of the governance produced by the state, and is distinguished from 'input legitimacy', which denotes legitimacy through participation (Győrffy and Martin 2023). State legitimacy and governance require certain aspects to be fulfilled. In line with previous research, we understand state monopoly on the use of force, and that this monopoly is exercised in a non-discriminatory manner, as essential to provide physical security to the population (Risse 2021). In most cases, popular support for democracy is tied to the legitimacy of the state, which can broadly be defined as the state's 'right to rule' or 'licence to govern' (Risse 2021; Risse and Stollenwerk 2018).

We should, however, note that state legitimacy also has to do with the role of informal decision-making procedures and the degree to which the state is able to integrate these into the formal democratic processes. A certain degree of informality is needed as it allows for flexibility and smoothness in the politico-administrative process, but it can be destructive if it becomes too prevalent. The state will be hindered from making effective and representative decisions when informal decision-making and private interests in the judiciary, executive or legislature are prevalent, which in turn has a detrimental effect on state legitimacy (Richter and Wunch 2020). This is one of the key characteristics of hybrid regimes, which will be explored in detail below.

There have been several attempts at understanding the conceptually vague 'grey zone' of regimes, which emerged after it became evident that the democratisation efforts of the 1980s and 1990s in many cases did not result in the liberal democracies that were envisioned. Following from the fall of the Soviet Union and the so-called 'third wave of democratisation' (Carothers 2002; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), the optimism surrounding the global spread of democracy was high. This turned out to be premature as it overly relied on the belief that a country that moved away from autocracy would turn towards democracy (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986).

However, as several countries moved away from autocracy but still failed to reach the status of a consolidated democracy, the optimism surrounding the democratisation efforts of the 1990s and early 2000s waned. Of the countries considered to be 'in transition' to democracy, many have stalled and have failed to become deep, well-functioning, liberal democracies (Carothers 2002; Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010; Merkel 2004; Morlino 2008). Instead, they have entered a political 'grey zone', being neither completely dictatorial nor en route to consolidating their democracies. They are hybrids.

Hybrid regimes and hybrid rule

The end of the Cold War was expected to bring about a seismic transformation in the newly emerging post-communist states, with the old order of a dominant party and state-led economic planning supposedly giving way to a market-based order as new leaders and an awaken citizenry embraced liberal democracy. With hindsight, these expectations were far too optimistic. New leaders and political parties did emerge and assumed power, but tensions, fissures and even violent conflict also emerged.

Driven by domestic power politics, the impact of EU interventions, and other Western powers' carrot-and-stick approaches, some states attempted to introduce the new economic and political order as best they could, mimicking EU liberal policies to gain and later maintain financial support, as well as to keep the prospect of future EU membership alive. Several of the states in transition, however, were caught between old-school state-led planning and a new form of 'casino' capitalism that allowed political entrepreneurs to capture valuable state assets that were being sold off for personal gain in the name of the free market (see Strange 1986). What emerged was not a liberal economy, but various versions of hybrid governance that simulated the liberalism advocated by the EU and other Western stakeholders (Osland and Peter 2019). The new states that emerged were characterised by rent- seeking politics based on different degrees of neo-patrimonial rule, ranging from more 'regulating' versions where resources are both extracted and redistributed, to the plundering form, where political 'big men' not only have sector-wide influence but in some cases captured the very state (Bøås 2012a; Bøås and Dunn 2017; Clapham 1999).

Thus, as the optimism of the first years after the end of the Cold War started to wane, hybrid rule and hybrid regimes have therefore become an increasingly topical

concept in political analysis. However, the origins of this concept are not in political science; it originated in the life sciences and was first used in the social sciences in Lynn's (1995) seminal study of political systems in Central America. Today, the term hybridity is widely used in political science, sociology, and criminology to account for complex political environments where the well-established categories of social science fail to describe patterns of social organisation, practices, and identities (Voltmer, Selvik and Høigilt 2021). For example, cases where rulers may have achieved power through the ballot box, but electoral outcomes are regularly disputed, and election violence and unrest are common. Institutions work haphazardly and outcomes cannot easily be predicted/ through formal means.

Another common denominator of such states is that they often struggle with an undefined or contested definition of its polity, making institutional reform both difficult and threatening to the regime in power as it may entail a complete loss of power and privilege, as well as a loss of basic rights. Hybrid regimes, therefore, tend to combine some aspects of democratic rule, authoritarian tendencies, and the instability of a conflict-prone state (see Wigell 2008). For any observer of the case countries this should sound familiar as this is what we have witnessed during the years that have passed since the fall of authoritarian communism.

As transitions have taken longer than envisioned, stalled, or simply failed, the various contours of hybridity that be can observed suggest that these states exist in a sort of limbo of unsettledness – they are not either or, but both authoritarian and democratic at the same time. How this is blended varies considerably among the six countries of concern to EU Re-engage. What they all have in common, is that part of this unsettledness is either caused by their inability to reach a consensus on the composition of their polity, or alternatively that this is because of their unsettledness. This is an empirical question that can only be answered through data and analysis. What is clear, however, is that this opens the state's institutional apparatus and environment for informal entrepreneurial activities.

This creates a state of affairs known as neopatrimonialism (see Médard 1992). This is a state that in its modular form combines a bureaucratic and a patrimonial logic; a dualistic system of social hierarchy where patrons use state resources to secure the loyalty of clients in the population. Here it is important to note that all states have a certain degree of patrimonial logic. This is simply because the state apparatus is not filled with robots, but by human beings with emotions, ideas, connections, and networks that are both professional and personal.

What therefore separates states is not whether aspects of patrimonialism are present, but to what extent these tends to determine outcomes and dominate behaviour. The more this is the case, the more prevalent is rent-seeking in patron- client relationships that in some of our cases can border on state capture towards a criminalisation of the state (see Bayart, Ellis and Hibou 1999).

This creates various levels of intimacy in the relationship between the formal and informal that can bring about the existence of what we may call a 'theatre state' and a 'shadow state'. The theatre state is understood as the formal state with officials lines of command and control between the executive, the parliament, the legislative, and the bureaucracy, while the shadow state is the real state where power rests in complex networks of patrons, clients, and dependents that can run from the very national centre of power all the way out to the smallest municipality in the periphery. Initial theories suggest that such a state would inherently be more prone to rapid regime change, political instability, and social unrest. However, recent and more detailed ethnographic studies suggest that this is not necessarily the case. They can remain quite stable for a considerable time, but if they fall, they tend to fall hard, meaning that once resilience is gone it evaporates completely as the state's institutional ability to react to crisis is limited and lacks legitimacy and credibility. This has consequences for levels of trust.

When political retribution and revenge politics is a constant risk, it can be extremely difficult to establish horizontal trust between different social groups and their respective political parties. While the uncertainty of electoral competition is 'mitigated by the certainty of mutual guarantees' in established democracies, an absence of credible institutional guarantees makes it difficult for parties in hybrid regimes to trust each other's commitments. Thus, actors face the 'constant risk that the structure of political interaction – including rules, players, and power relations – will change in subsequent rounds' (Lupu and Riedl 2013: 1344-45). This lack of trust impedes the introduction of reforms that would benefit the country in the long run, as politicians are often motivated by short-term gains (Bolkvadze 2020). As this can make domestic reforms much harder to implement, it also has consequences for international interventions. The extent to which the intervening power of the EU in democracy promotion has taken the hybrid nature of the states in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans into consideration is one of the key questions that our project will provide answers to. Have EU programming only targeted the 'theatre state', or has it had an impact also on the 'shadow state' to the extent that the latter is prevalent in the countries where our research is carried out?

Horizontal and vertical trust

High levels of trust and thereby trustful societies is generally seen as a key feature of consolidated democracies. The idea is that life is good, society is peaceful, and the state is strong and benevolent when people trust each other – neighbours trust neighbours irrespectively of age, gender, class, ethnicity etc., and they trust state institutions and their political leaders. This is how, in theory, a society of both horizontal and vertical trust should look like. In parts of the literature this is often defined as social cohesion that Chan, To and Chan (2006: 290), defines social as a 'state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterised by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations'.

In such a society most will believe their neighbours, with whom they interact quite regularly across divisions such as age, gender, class, and ethnicity, are people that they can live peacefully with and have meaningful interactions with that are personal, associational, and interest based. While differences in opinion occur on political issues as well as on several other issues, the majority will nonetheless think of those with other opinions than themselves as decent people that generally wants the best for themselves and their fellow citizens. Likewise, in such a society, most people will trust their political leaders and the respective state institutions. They will think that despite disagreement with a particular political party or political leader, or with the approach taken by a public institution, these parties, those leaders, and that particular public institution tries to act for a common good. They do not think that they are biased towards them as members of a particular group in society or that leaders, be it in politics or of public institutions, are only there to serve themselves and their pockets. While such a harmonious society may sound good, there are problems with this way of thinking.

First, it can be the sign of a society that has become too sedated and consensual. Trust is good, but for democracy to deliver as a system of rule on all parameters it also needs critical voices and discourses. Otherwise, it will stagnate and possibly morph into something else. This means that unpacking what trust actually means in

our empirical inquires will be key. What is the basis for trust among neighbours – who do and do they not trust, and what is the basis for trust and mistrust. Likewise, what is the basis for trust or mistrust in political parties, the political class, and public institutions. Whether people trust other people rather than parties and institutions will

be one important marker to check for, as the former is personal while the latter is more ideational.

To illustrate why an elevated level of trust can be problematic, let us briefly consider China. The high level of vertical trust reported here may be real, but it could also be the result of a lack of transparency, restricted freedom of speech, or heavy state propaganda, where dissent is not tolerated, and information is tightly controlled. This environment can foster a false sense of trust in the state because alternative viewpoints are suppressed.

Alternatively, we can say that individuals growing up in a country with low vertical trust might be more sceptical of information coming from the state or official channels. This scepticism can engender a habit of critical thinking and verification of information, making these individuals more resilient to fake news and trolling. They may be accustomed to seeking out multiple sources of information and questioning the narratives presented by those in power. In contrast, in countries with high vertical trust, the population might be more susceptible to official narratives and less inclined to question information. If the state's trust is misused to propagate false information, this could make them more vulnerable to disinformation campaigns.

Secondly, the ideal model of a trustful society where people engage with each other across lines of divisions that exist in any society, is not much of a fact in modern life (if it ever has been). Inequality is rising, and as Robert Putnam (1995) eloquently showed us – we are 'bowling alone'. The associational networks that were supposed to be the glue of horizontal social trust simply do not exist anymore or at best have become severely weakened. This is the case for the countries within the EU, and it is certainly also a strong trend in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans (that is, if this ever existed at all).

What we are left with is social media that, through its algorithms, re-enforces a vernacular social architecture that may bond those in one vernacular architecture tightly together, while also insulating that vernacular from other social architectures (see Bøås 2012b). Understanding how prevalent this type of social organisation is and what types of political economies it creates is key for any

external intervening agent with an ambition of having an impact on increasing social resilience through programmes and projects. This is equally the case for the EU as any other intervening external force.

In our contemporary world, this comes on top of already existing and mutually reinforcing cleavages. Following Lipset and Rokkan's definition (1967), we understand social cleavages as having three main characteristics: involving an identifiable division, which separates people by sociocultural, socioeconomic, or territorial characteristics; self-identifying social groups willing to act based on their identity; and expressed in organisational terms, be that in the form of interest groups or political parties. It has been shown that democracy may prevail in pluralistic societies, making such democracies stable (Lijphart 1977). However, the role such cleavages play in countries where hybridity has become an integral part of political life is less certain (Panzano 2023), and it will be a task for the empirical research of our project to probe how this manifest itself over time in the case countries as this has important ramifications for the resilience both of individuals and social groups, and thereby for the country at large.

Resilience

While the concept of resilience did not originate in EU circles, it has quickly become one of the EU's key concepts in foreign and security policy. Since the introduction of the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016, resilience has been at the forefront of EU foreign policy and interaction with its neighbours. With the 2020 Strategic Compass, resilience was brought home to also become a strategic goal within the EU itself (EEAS 2020). While resilience has been criticised for being a 'buzzword' without much analytical value, it has proved a sticky concept that is still in use in EU strategies and policies and has even become the new focus in preventing a breakdown of governance (Stollenwerk 2021).

Regarding resilience, there are always several questions that need to be asked before determining what kind of resilience we refer to. Resilience has proven itself to be a highly flexible concept which lacks an academic consensus regarding how it should be defined. While some scholars highlight the ability to return to a previously defined state after disruption (Malkki and Sinkkonen 2016), others focus on the need to be adaptable in the face of uncertainty and change (Bourbeau 2018; Joseph 2019). Consequently, resilience can be understood as a typology ranging from

persistence/maintenance to transformation (Ungar 2018). Resilience as persistence or maintenance refers to an understanding of resilience as 'bouncing back' after a disturbance, where the individual, society or system seeks to return to the same state of affairs as before the event took place, highlighting stability over changeability. However, returning to status quo might in some instances neither be an opportunity nor much to desire. In such instances, resilience may be referred to as adaptability or flexibility, where the goal is rather to aim for changes to adapt to an unstable environment, but which does not challenge the basis of the system (Bourbeau 2018). Finally, resilience may be understood as a broader transformation of the society or system, where the combined set of changes tips the system into a new regime of direction (Chelleri et al 2015).

Resilience acknowledges uncertainty and complexity as an inherent characteristic of the international system and emphasises internal abilities to handle this uncertainty (Juncos 2016). The recent crises of the past decade can help explain the turn towards a concept based on an ontological understanding of the world as uncertain and unstable. Crises can affect anybody. In that regard we are all vulnerable. Thus, what separates states is not vulnerability per se, but the ability to react on one's own to an external or internal event or crisis, or if needed receive and utilise external assistance to deal with this. The latter is what the EU is doing through its various policies and programmes aiming to support the consolidation of democracy in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans. The problem is not only one of the recipient's willingness to utilise this assistance but also of the state's capacity to react and make use of it. Resilience regarding democracy promotion, therefore, also rests on the combination of state capacity administratively as well as the regime's interest in utilising such assistance effectively (see Bøås 2017). This must therefore be another key element in the research the EU Re-engage consortium is implementing.

To come to terms with how we jointly should approach the question of resilience, we suggest that a good platform to begin with is the approach taken by the European Commission (2020: 6) that sees it as 'the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions, in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner'. This understanding incorporates the three varieties of resilience mentioned earlier, as it includes both the persistence understanding of resilience as well as the more adaptable varieties. These challenges may take the form of both internal and external and may be both clear and obvious threats or take the form of more diffuse and hybrid challenges. This is in line with the recent rise of a more

complex and interconnected global arena where the threats faced by states and societies are less clear-cut, such as cyber warfare and information warfare.

In addition to being conceptualised as different varieties, resilience can be understood and implemented at various levels of society. We, therefore, distinguish between state, societal, and individual resilience. There is a need for more than robust institutions to build a truly resilient society. Ironically, resilient, and robust state institutions may also work as a hindrance to democratisation, and state resilience may thus function to stabilise an autocratic regime (Stollenwerk, Börzel and Risse 2018). Consequently, individual, and societal resilience are equally important, and should not automatically be compartmentalised as a dimension of state resilience.

A resilient state may be a stable state. However, this is not necessarily the case, and it is necessary to differentiate between resilience and stability (Holling 1973; Wagner and Anholt 2016). As mentioned, resilient state institutions may also be resilient against positive democratic influences (Sinkkonen 2021). Our understanding of resilience denotes more than remaining unchanged in the face of internal or external threats; it includes the ability to change according to what is necessary to handle such threats.

As hybrid regimes are a combination of both democratic and autocratic trends, the resilience of both becomes central to measuring overall resilience. In instances where authoritarian aspects of a hybrid regime prove to be resilient against positive democratic influences, and cases of corruption, lack of transparency and participation remain high irrespective of internal and external efforts of change, societal resilience will suffer.

Resilience against negative external influence

A resilient society succeeds in maintaining governance effectiveness in periods of heightened risk. To be considered resilient, a society builds on three sources of resilience: a healthy level of social trust among the population, the majority of state and non-state actors are considered legitimate, and well-functioning, effective and inclusive government institutions (Stollenwerk, Börzel and Risse 2021). Consequently, the factors that contribute to a resilient society correspond with the factors that make a system of governance democratic.

A common theme among countries surrounding the borders of the EU is contestations where external and non-state actors challenge the existing political order – what we refer to as negative external and/or internal influence. Less resilient states and societies are more susceptible to negative external influence, so-called 'black knights', understood as external actors who support autocracy or autocratisation (Sejersen 2018). These are, in essence, competing external actors' informal clandestine engagement with the objective of influencing political outcomes. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine offers the most brutal example, other less dramatic types of negative engagement – including economic engagement involving domination or exploitation, as well as misinformation campaigns or hybrid warfare – may also have damaging impacts. While previous studies have taken a particular interest in China and Russia as negative external actors (Bader, Grävingholt and Kästner 2014; Chou 2017; Sejersen 2019; Weyland 2017), Turkey is potentially playing a similar role in the Western Balkans, although to a less malevolent extent. Many states in the two regions are unconsolidated democracies, and therefore particularly vulnerable to such engagement. Our hypothesis is therefore that relatively prominent levels of horizontal and vertical trust combined with low levels of hybridity, creates higher levels of resilience that can work as a shield against negative external influence.

Democratic backsliding and democratic resilience

The literature on resilience ties closely with two emergent areas of study, namely that of democratic resilience and that of democratic backsliding. We understand democratic resilience as the 'persistence of democratic institutions' where threatened regimes avoid losing democratic quality (Boese et al 2021). Should such a decline in democratic quality or debilitation or elimination of democratic institutions occur, it would be considered an example of democratic backsliding. We understand democratic resilience as either denoting the avoidance of an episode of autocratisation altogether or the ability to avoid democratic breakdown once an episode of autocratisation has begun (Boese et al. 2021).

While we recognise that democratic backsliding may occur, it is a concept that needs analytical reflection and empirical unpacking. The reason for this is that for something to backslide, previous progress is necessary and assumed. This takes us back to our discussion above about democracy as a system of rule: it is about more

than the right to vote and the right to stand for election. It must deliver jobs, livelihoods, and a future-oriented positive outlook. If democracy has failed to give people a sense of security as well as belief in the future, can we then talk about democracy as backsliding, or should we rather define this as a failed democracy? The empirical research to be carried out by EU Re-engage needs to have an open mind to this question. It cannot be determined a priori, as the success or failure of democracy in each of the case countries must be assess and analysed over time, and then checked against the result of existing time-series data (as the Eurobarometer and similar surveys) and the result of our vignette-surveys.

Returning to the conceptual discussion and related to the discussion above on resilience, averting autocratisation is more in line with an understanding of resilience as maintaining status quo, while the ability to react positively to 'right the ship' if democratic backsliding in accordance with our approach has set in denotes a sense of resilience more focused on adaptability and transformation.

It is important to note that both democratic resilience and democratic backsliding does not require fully formed, consolidated, liberal democracies to apply. Democratic backsliding may also occur to 'less' democratic regimes, effectively moving them closer towards becoming an autocracy. In the same way, democratic resilience can refer to democratic aspects or institutions that exist in imperfect democracies.

Regarding cleavages and social trust, evidence has shown that countries that have experienced episodes of autocratisation or democratic backsliding have done so in contexts of ethno-nationalist and class cleavages that have been amplified by inequality, unemployment, and social insecurity. Evidence suggests that democracies may remain stable despite inter-state cleavages. However, when democracies, particularly an unsettled one, fails to deliver as a system of rule for the population at large or parts of it, ethno-nationalist cleavages may accelerate the process, as they may lend themselves to act as blueprints for polarisation and a decrease of societal trust (Lührmann 2021).

Preliminary conclusions: the multiverse of concepts, hybrid rule, and interventions

The concepts discussed here can stand alone, but they are also intimately connected. In our approach they will work together to create a framework of theory and method. This framework will be utilised to come to terms with the multiverse1 that is created when EU polices from the Brussels universe meets the universes of hybrid rule in states with relatively weak institutions and unsettled polities. Together this comes to represent a multiverse of interventions and reactions – a hypothetical set of all these universes, which together can be presumed to comprise everything that exists: space, place, and people; history and time; material resources and intangible information; institutions, and the social norms that informs them. The different universes within this multiverse therefore exists in parallel, but they also co-exist, and are bound both by geography and history. In each parallel there are several stories. They are not alternatives to each other, but each are real and each happens simultaneously. The quest is therefore how to unpack this in such a sensitive manner that we do not automatically privilege one over another, but carefully consider how events and reactions to events (including interventions) creates new reactions that yet again sets in motion new interventions that leads to the production of new narratives and counternarratives.

This will be spelled out in more detail in the theory and methods paper and operationalised in the field manual. Here, we will end the first version of this paper by reiterating that for people as well as states, we are all hybrids. No purity of person or pure form of rule exists. All political systems are pulled by the weight of history, drawn towards the future of the contradictions of the present. The progress towards a grand liberal democratic future that seemed so self-evident some decades ago seems increasingly uncertain and forever questioned. The continued progress of democracy once installed cannot be taken for granted as time is not necessarily cumulative, meaning that once elections are held with a certain degree of regularity, democracy becomes an engine that never runs empty of fuel. This is not how things work in this multiverse where time is not necessarily just cumulative; it can just as well be circular. And if time also works circularly, it means that history is not just history, but

[1] The idea (or concept) of multiverse has been discussed since ancient Greek philosophy. In its contemporary form mainly in mathematics and physics, but the American philosopher and psychologist William James used the term in 1895, but here we are mainly inspired by Erwin Schrödinger's Dublin lecture in 1952 where he stated that his equations seem to describe several different histories that were not alternatives but happened simultaneously (see Gribbin 2012).

something that constantly can be revisited and political entrepreneurs can operate as 'time bandits' that captures the imaginaries of the politics of people and place. One example is the many uses in Serbia of the narrative of the battle of Kosovo in 1389. It is history, but also very much present in the contemporary as history is still not complete (and most likely never will be).

The point is that democracy as a system of rule is based on the production of winners and losers, but equally important that both winners and losers believe in and respect the rules of democracy. This is fine in theory and in political systems where it does not matter that much who wins and who loses. People may argue over issues during an election campaign, some may even be a little angry with each other if they disagree on their preferred candidate, but in a mature democracy that delivers economic safety, protects from physical harm, and offers predictability of the future, who wins and who loses is not a matter of 'life and death'. Life goes on with the same regularity after the votes have been counted. Nobody needs to be seriously afraid of losing their job or of bodily harm if their candidate loses.

This is how it is supposed to be, but not necessarily how it works. Democracy is supposed to create stability, maturity, and certainty, but what if it is the opposite? What if what people has gotten is uncertainty – an unpredictable economic lifeworld and a general sense of insecurity. What emerges is not increased horizontal and vertical trust, or resilience in accordance to theory, but something else: a nostalgia of a past of what is now considered a secure life where everybody knew their place, or the tolerance of an authoritarian turn with electoral biases and other means of preventing opposition forces from coming to power. As this would mean much more than just the loss of election, it is perceived as the loss of everything – of security as well as dignity.

In this multiverse all these things exist on parallel planes, but they also tend to collude. Democracy and democratic rule may mean quite different things at the same time. Trust is trust in your in-group more than anything else, but haphazard alliances are still possible, and resilience becomes a question of resilience against what your fear the most. And into this internal brew it is also introduced external ingredients that try to place their flavour on what is boiling. Here comes the EU's democracy support that will create its own chain reaction of events, agents, entrepreneurs, and agency, as well as that of other external forces seeking influence and impact which sets in motion events that may supplement, contradict, or completely oppose those that EU policies and programs tries to encourage. How this actually is played out, how the EU's approaches are fine-tuned or not to this multiverse, and if and how they can be improved, this is what EU Re-engage must try to decipher.

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ABOUT RE-ENGAGE

Russia's war against Ukraine has radically altered European security. Confronted by the direst security crisis in decades, EU policymakers are forced to fundamentally rethink their security policies. Europe has demonstrated unexpected unity and resolve, adopting a series of sanctions against Russia, increasing national defence spending, but also by deciding on a historic revival of the EU enlargement process.

Still, there is an urgent need to make sure that this process contributes to democratic, well-functioning and stable neighbourhood states, capable of countering external threats, particularly those posed by hybrid warfare. A thorough investigation is required to determine how this can be achieved without compromising the EU's values and security in the current context.

RE-ENGAGE's overarching ambition is to assist the EU in refining its foreign policy toolbox, including its enlargement and neighbourhood policies. This will enhance the Union's geopolitical leverage and provide better tools for democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. To achieve this goal, RE-ENGAGE will conduct in-depth studies in six candidate countries – three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).