

D3.2 Theory and methods



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Theory and methods – Towards social theory?

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SUMMARY

This paper explores the relationship between theory and method and serves as a basis for further studies in the project's focus areas the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood. It posits a multiversal approach to understanding the complex interplay between EU policies and the political realities of states with hybrid governance structures. By advocating for analytical eclecticism, the paper underscores the necessity of integrating diverse theoretical perspectives to pragmatically navigate and address the multifaceted social issues emerging from EU external engagements.

Further, the document explores the interactions of various external actors—specifically the EU, Russia, China, and the United States—with these regions, assessing the impacts and efficacy of their engagements in fostering democratic institutions and rule of law. This exploration is poised to evolve into a social theory that not only addresses the complexities inherent in EU enlargement and democracy promotion but also remains adaptable to the empirical realities encountered during the project's lifecycle. The ultimate intention is to refine these insights into a standalone academic article, continually updated as the project progresses, to provide a comprehensive and dynamic academic and practical contribution to the field.



Introduction

This paper is the second of a trio of papers that will establish the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological framework for the RE-ENGAGE. While the first paper (D3.1 Key concepts – Democracy and trust, hybrid regimes and resilience) prepared an initial conceptualization of the project's key concepts, the current paper charts the relationship between theory and method. As such it also establishes a bridge towards the third paper that will be the field manual. This trio of papers will have the status of 'living' documents, meaning that they will be revised, refined, and republished as the project evolves and concepts, methods 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 towards the end of the project.

In the first paper (Bøås, Giske & Osland 2024) we ended by arguing for a multiversal understanding of the complex relationship between the EU policies and programming, and the states in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood. This is therefore our suggested framing of what happens when European Union (EU) policies meets the universe of hybrid rule in states with relatively weak institutions and unsettled polities. Thus, our working assumption is that these very different understandings of reality – or universes exists in parallel (e.g. multiverses), but also co-exist, bound by geography and history. Each produce histories that are not alternatives to each other, but each real and happens simultaneously. The challenging task is therefore how to unpack this a way that carefully considers how events and reactions to events (including involvement by external stakeholders) creates new reactions that yet again sets in motion new forms of engagements that lead to the production of new narratives and counternarratives.

What we therefore must set out to achieve is a theoretical approach wide enough to help us understand EU enlargement and external democracy promotion as well as other types of external engagement by states with regimes of varying degrees of hybridity and societies with different forms and degrees of trust and resilience. The overall objective is therefore to produce analyses that in the end can point to what type of external engagement is needed to strengthen democratic institutions and

rule of law in various forms of hybrid regimes that also is the object of other types of external engagement that do not have democracy promotion and rule of law as a guiding principle.

To be able to undertake this type of analysis, traditional theory testing would not take us very far. The aim is not to isolate the different social mechanism at play, but rather seek to capture the interactions among different complexes of mechanisms whose order is not given, but in constant flux, sometimes slowly and more predictable, other times at almost superspeed and without much recognisable pattern to them (at least immediately). To do this we rely on what Sil and Katzenstein (2010) refers to as analytical eclecticism. This is not an alternative theory or method of research, but an intellectual mode or a way of thinking about social issues. According to them (Sil & Katzenstein 2010: 412), analytical eclecticism rests on two dimensions: First, a pragmatist research ethos manifested concretely in a search for middle-range theorisation and comparisons aiming to explain concrete questions of policy and practice; Second; a way of addressing problems and cases of a wide scope that incorporates rather than isolates the complexities and messiness of real life.

In what follows we will discuss how to theorise external engagement, focusing on the particularities of the EU, but also how other external actors operate in the Western Balkans and in the Eastern Neighbourhood. In the next step, we discuss how we theoretically can come to grips with the practice of rule and governance in hybrid regimes, discussing neo-patrimonial practices of rule and how rulers even in relatively weak states can sit on the throne of relatively strong regimes resigning over weak societies. We will present a theoretical framework that builds on insights about external engagement and EU democracy promotion within the framework of the neighbourhood and the enlargement policy combined with knowledge about the functioning of and the receptiveness of hybrid regimes for this and other types of external engagement.

The aim is to present a framework that enables us to deliver more fine-grained analysis that take seriously the constant interaction between the different understanding of the reality (e.g. the multiverse). To achieve this we need to move towards social theory as what we must grapple with is in between the established levels of political study. We need to take in international relations and foreign policy perspectives as the EU is an international actor that pursues its foreign policy (in

this case democracy promotion abroad) towards our case countries, but this is not enough. We also need to understand the domestic level in the case countries – how states and regime has evolved over time, and how various population groups have reacted to this. This means that we also need a theory of how people’s perceptions are formed and shaped by the weight of history, but also by the contemporary intersectionality of the domestic and the international levels. What is therefore needed is a move toward social theory based on the methodological principles of analytical eclecticism.

Theorising external engagement

External engagement varies depending on the type of actor being engaged as well as its values, interests, and resources. What separates the EU from other agents of external involvement is linked to its institutional design and the fact that the EU is a hybrid itself – more than a multilateral international organisation and less than a federal state. This makes the EU more capable to make decisions (at least in some areas), and the decisions are not necessarily always based on clearly defined interests. The reason for this is that EU policies are a result of compromises that also are based on certain sets of norms and principles. Regarding the EUs engagement in the Eastern neighbourhood and the Western Balkans, this is dominated by the fact that these two regions have been part of either the Neighbourhood Policy or the enlargement agenda for more than 20 years. This means that all initiatives and support to candidate and potential candidate countries are means to prepare them for future membership. While the support for enlargement has varied somewhat, it has become stronger because of the war in Ukraine (Buras & Morina 2023). A common explanation for this is that it is seen as a crucial security community building instrument (Sjursen 2002; Rieker 2016). This also explains why it is getting more support in times of war and geopolitical tensions.

As the focus of this project is to find out how the EU can re-engage with those of its neighbours that are either candidates or potential candidates, we need to understand the mechanisms of enlargement. In the end, it is in this context that all EU engagement towards these countries is being framed, with the notable exception

of Ukraine which, in addition to being a candidate country, has a special form of attention by both the EU and other actors due to the ongoing war.

The intention of the EU is to prepare all these states for future membership in a partly supranational institution. This means that its engagement covers almost all aspects of domestic politics and rule, including adjustments to a well- functioning democracy that respects rule of law and ensuring that they have the absorbing capacity to comply with the EU norms, values, laws, and regulations (the *acquis communautaire*).

Due to the special character of EU engagement in these two regions, we will have to distinguish between EU engagement and the external engagement of other actors, such as China, Turkey, Russia, but also the US, as these four actors, although being very different, have one thing in common and that is that they are all state actors.

Understanding the mechanisms of the EU enlargement

EU enlargement was for many years referred to as the most successful foreign policy tool of the Union (Moravcsik and Vachudova 2003; Barbé & Johansson-Nogués 2008; Epstein & Jacoby 2014; Vachudova 2014). More recently, however, it has been more common to argue that the EU has come to both over-promised and under-delivered (Krastev & Holmes 2019; Scicluna & Auer 2023). According to Krastev & Holms (2019) the EU needs to offer a more realistic vision of world order, making room for alternative models while maintaining faith in the resilience of liberalism.

Much has been written about the mechanisms underlying the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies.¹ With the transition process in many neighbouring states proving to be more problematic than initially expected, however, research has shifted towards explaining the slowdown and setbacks (Börzel & Grimm 2018). The fact that some countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova) with – until recently – weak to non-existent membership prospects have in certain periods scored better on V-Dem democracy indexes than some of the countries in the

¹ For an extensive overview, see Schumacher, Marchetti and Demmelhuber (2018).

Western Balkans (Bosnia and Serbia) indicates that the prospect of membership may also be less important than previously assumed (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2020; Rieker 2016). These insights have led to the neighbourhood policy being revised away from a 'one-size-fits-all' model towards a more differentiated approach that considers the specifics of each target state (Rieker 2016, Batora & Rieker 2018). Now that many of the countries that were part of the neighbourhood policy and eastern partnership have been integrated into the enlargement agenda – either as candidates or potential candidates – and that this occurred in response to the Russian war against Ukraine, the policy requires further revision. While the catalysing situation is dramatic, it is not the first time the enlargement process has been revised.

According to Freyburg et al. (2015), three periods in the EU's external democracy promotion efforts can be identified, and, moreover, construed as ideal types. The first period, which was primarily based on socio-economic models and transnational exchange (Lipset 1959), can be referred to as the linkage model and was applied by European institutions prior to the end of the Cold War. The second period was modelled around different types of political conditionality, which focused on changes in the ruling elites or ruling elite attitudes through mechanisms of conditionality (O'Donnell et al. 1986; Przeworski 1991). Here, for a target country to receive rewards from the EU such as 'financial aid, technical assistance, trade agreements, association treaties, and ultimately, membership, it must adopt specific democratic institutions, legal frameworks, and practices' (Freyburg et al. 2015: 10–11). This model, which is often referred to as the leverage model, has been dominant since the end of the Cold War and is still an essential part of the EU's approach. The third period centres around the governance model, characterised by a move away from these 'one-size-fits-all' models towards transferring democratic principles through socialisation/learning via legal-administrative reform in specific sectors, depending on the needs of the different countries (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig 2011). It has become increasingly evident that the conditionality/leverage model only under certain circumstances and if the membership prospects are credible (Börzel & Schimmelfennig 2017; Freyburg et al. 2015; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2020). After a period with little progress in the enlargement process, the leverage model has increasingly been replaced by approaches more in line with the governance model, which is more focused on promoting democratic principles such as transparency, accountability and

participating, aiming to indirectly promote democracy through the process of diffusion (Delcour & Wolczuk 2015).

But even the governance model has its obvious limits. While it has resulted in greater governance effectiveness in these countries, it has been less successful regarding democracy promotion (Börzel & Schimmelfennig 2017; Freyburg et al. 2015; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2020). As stable democracy is seen as the best way of building resilience against attempt at negative external interference, this is a challenge. The pressing question is therefore how to develop an approach that will better succeed in promoting democracy, also in states characterised by varying degrees of hybrid governance and that find themselves in a state of war and/or increased geopolitical tensions.

To suggest an alternative model, we need to point to the challenges with the existing ones. Much has to do with the fact that most of the external Europeanisation literature is built on ideas that predominated at the end of the Cold War, that the US and Western Europe were on the ‘winning’ side of history (Fukuyama 1989). 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 planning economy supposedly giving way to a market-based order as new leaders and citizens embraced liberal democracy. With hindsight, this expectation was far too optimistic. While new leaders and parties did take over, 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 keep the prospect of future EU membership alive (Krašev & Holmes 2019).

The above aptly describes what emerged in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood, despite the expected political-economic system transition initially being met with great enthusiasm. While these sentiments have waned, much of the political discourse in the EU around this process has continued unabated, as if embedding liberal democracy in the region were merely a matter of improved support. This theory of change fails to take into account several crucial aspects, however, including reciprocity and how external democracy promotion affects the different types of neopatrimonialism and clientelism at play; the intersection

between the formal and the informal; the room for manoeuvre afforded illegal and extra-legal activities, as well as associated power politics; and how other external actors either reinforce or actively oppose these processes and the EU's democracy promotion efforts.

The Europeanisation literature has so far not been able to address this challenge. While the governance model is a step in the right direction, it is limited by the fact that it is mainly directed at formal state sectors. This is partly due to EU democracy promotion being predicated on the assumption that neighbouring countries are engaged in a linear transition to democracy and that the Union can help in promoting and hastening this process. Rather than transitions to a Western type of democracy, however, more hybrid forms of governance have emerged, whereby some states display both a turn to authoritarianism (e.g. Serbia) and dysfunctional institutional attributes that result in corruption and the mismanagement of state resources. Such regimes are generally short-lived and less stable compared to consolidated democracies and autocracies (Knutsen & Nygård 2015). The question is whether, how and to what extent the Union's current approach manages to address these challenges in a constructive way? To provide an answer to this question, an in-depth analysis of both the mechanisms of other external actors as well how the different types of engagement are being perceived and received by the local population is crucial. This will constitute our empirical bridgeway towards a social theory of democracy promotion and trust in a time of geopolitical conflict and turmoil.

Understanding the mechanisms of other external actors

Even before the Russo-Ukrainian war, frustrations with the EU's enlargement policy were growing in parallel with active attempts by competing actors to lure states in the region away from the EU. As such, the involvement of other external actors must also be critically assessed at both a macro level and in terms of individual case studies. Likewise, understanding how external actors, particularly Russia, China, and Turkey, but also the USA, affect EU enlargement and democracy promotion efforts is imperative, as well as whether these impacts are beneficial,

detrimental, or inconsequential. Our initial hypothesis suggests that this varies according to the case at hand.

Negative external actors: Russia, China, Turkey

While the debate rages about the future of the liberal international order, other non-Western great powers work to influence new governance models and shape the world order (Öniş & Kutlay 2020; Flockhart 2016). In the academic literature, influence from 'black knights' comprises various forms of 'autocracy promotion' and 'autocracy support', often indirectly and mainly in the name of regime survival (Börzel 2015; Chou 2017). While such studies have taken a particular interest in China and Russia as 'black knights' (Bader, Gravingholt & Kästner 2019; Chou 2017; Sejersen 2019; Weyland 2017), Turkey is playing a similar role in certain states in the Western Balkans. The geopolitical ambitions of actors these states continue to challenge the Neighbourhood Policy and accession process, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine serving as the most brutal example of how external intervention can negatively affect a country's stability and development.

Invasion is not the only way external actors may influence domestic actors in the EU's neighbourhood. External actors may negatively affect attempts at democratisation or work to destabilise already existing democratic institutions and norms. One such way is by engaging in information warfare, which thrives on pre-existing distrust and societal polarisation, with misinformation and fake news campaigns directly targeting domestic audiences. Destabilisation can happen either because, having lost trust in government and the state, people believe the narratives such campaigns present, or because they offer a means of achieving some other objective, such as bringing down a disliked government.

While the Russian case is clear-cut, the question of actors such as China and Turkey are less obvious, although general engagement between these states and the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries is growing. Recent research has shown the Western Balkans are particularly vulnerable to Chinese influence, as Chinese investments may pose a lucrative economic opportunity without having to engage with the EU's conditionality instrument (Khaze & Wang 2020). In the same vein,

Turkey works to encourage neo-patrimonial structures to its advantage in former Soviet republics (Frahm & Hoffman 2021).

However, just as EU involvement in the neighbourhood has had unintended effects, so has the involvement of these negative external actors. The most obvious example is the consequence of the Russian invasion where Georgia, Moldova, and the Ukraine all applied for membership to the EU and were granted the status of candidacy. This is not the first time this has happened. Thus, consequently, illiberal forces may have the opposite effect and rather provide motivation to move in a more liberal direction.

Competing actors: US

The new states of the post-Soviet region have been an area of interest and promotion of liberal values not just for the EU but for the US as well. However, recent developments in US domestic politics have cast doubt of their commitment to democracy promotion in Eastern Europe, as years of the Trump administration's 'America First' strategy created ripples of uncertainty in Europe (Carothers 2020). While the US under the Biden administration has offered a more familiar political landscape for the EU to manoeuvre through its reconfirmed commitment to Europe, 'Trumpism' is not gone and with the upcoming US presidential elections, there is no guarantee of the US' future engagement in Europe.

Previous American involvement in Europe has mainly been characterised by selective engagement in countries in the EU's neighbourhood (Dandashly & Noutcheva 2021). While previous research tended to differentiate between EU and US external engagement, pegging the EU as a 'soft' actor compared to US' 'hard' power, this distinction has largely washed out, as both have tended to promote stability over democracy (Risse & Babayan 2015). While past EU democracy efforts have been focused on effective government, strengthening state institutions, and fostering approximation with EU rules, the US has been less concerned with state-centric approaches, rather working to promote checks and balances, a free and independent media, and a strengthening of civil society, as well as being more careful with sanctioning human rights violations and misuse of democratic institutions (Börzel 2015; Delcour and Wolczuk 2015).

Theorising the receptiveness of hybrid regimes

Counteracting powers are not the only forces acting against democracy promotion in the Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, as democracy promotion is dependent on a receptive domestic constituency as well, as well as domestic adaptation to EU norms (Delcour & Wolczuk 2015). Consequently, domestic mobilisation at society level is a precondition for successful EU engagement (Wunsch 2019).

Still, we cannot neglect societal resistance, be it in the form of formal opposition or the more subtle ways of the art of not being governed. Together this has important repercussions for state-society relations; what form they take and the level of trust and not the least the distrust they give birth to. From grand surveys like the World Value Survey and others we know that the level of trust in public institutions, political parties and leaders have decreased significantly during the last decades. What we know less about is how public perceptions are formed and nurtured under the rule of hybrid regimes. These three elements of theoretical discussions will be melted together as we discuss what such a theoretical approach will have of implications for our wide set of methods (interviews, focus groups and life history encounters, project process tracing, and vignette survey experiments).

States, institutional rule, and other forms of rule

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, new states were created who were projected to move rapidly towards liberal democracy based on Western values. This move, however, never came about. While some countries in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood have made progress consolidating democracy, others have seen their transition stall or even backslide. States in transition were caught between old-school state-led planning and casino-capitalism, allowing political entrepreneurs to capture valuable state assets that were being sold off in the name of the free market (Strange 1986). In cases of backsliding, the unpredictability of life and livelihoods created a fertile breeding ground for patron-client relationships and neo-patrimonial politics.

In short, what emerged was not a liberal market democracy, but various versions of hybrid governance that simulated the liberalism advocated by the EU and other external stakeholders. Such states were characterised by rent-seeking politics based on different types of neo-patrimonial rule, with variants ranging from the regulating form, where resources are both extracted and redistributed, to the plundering form, where 'big men' not only have sector-wide influence but in some cases capture the very state (Bøås 2012; Bøås & Dunn 2017; Clapham 1999).

Neo-patrimonialism, the existence of dominant personal networks that exists next to the legal-rational bureaucracy driven by impersonal competition, is prevalent in hybrid regimes (Erdmann & Engel 2006; Frahm & Hoffmann 2021). This type of logic threatens the development of well-functioning political and societal development as it creates two systems that exist and permeate each other which creates a system characterised by insecurity regarding how systems and structures work and behave. Current EU democracy promotion efforts have failed to take these dynamics fully into account, where the formal and informal exists side-by-side, which gives room for manoeuvre to extra-legal power politics.

While all states contain some elements of hybrid governance (for example neopatrimonial practices), it is largely controlled in consolidated democracies. In a hybrid regime, elections are important for bolstering the legitimacy of the regime in power while the regimes simultaneously rely on softer forms of manipulation, uneven access to media, and less visible or brutal threats and intimidation (Levitsky & Way 2020). Parliaments are weak but still function as a platform for the opposition. Rule of law exists but is weakened by the regime's attempts to bring courts and judges under its control. Taken together, this creates a system of insecurity where regime legitimacy is based on other grounds than elections and effectiveness of government as an expression bureaucratic rationality. This does not mean that hybrid regimes can not act rationally or that leaders of such regimes just follow their whims and narcissistic self-interest. These regimes and their leaders are also rational actors, but their rationality is based on another understanding of the context that confronts them and the interest calculation that this leads to. Regime preservation may be an obvious one, but this should not rule out that leaders of hybrid regime that may base their rule on a whole set of neopatrimonial practices may also harbour political objectives beyond and above self-preservation and personal enrichment. These objectives may range from grandiose plans of making their country great again – recapturing lost dignity and at times even territory, to

nostalgic ideas about a past lost because somebody purposefully squandered it and now it is the historic task of the leader at hand to lead his or her people back to where they belong – to a state of traditional values for example. This may ring more than one bell with population group who bewildered and confused have seen change happening fast but rarely to their perceived benefit.

Trust and resilience: state-society relations under hybrid rule

Understanding the lifeworlds of people

Beyond the concepts of state, institutions, external interventions, trust, and resilience there are people, ordinary citizens and they also have ideas, interests, hopes, and aspirations that they try to cling to, attach themselves to, and work towards. But what is it that we humans crave for? We would argue that it is not necessarily power, prestige or wealth per se, but a minimum of control of life and its surroundings, and thereby of our 'lifeworld' as small or large as it may be (see Bøås 2015).

'Lifeworlds' across nations and international regions may in their essence not differ that much as any life on earth always depends on a combination of chance and opportunity for social and economic becoming, and we all belong to multiverses where we live our lines along multiple paths of transition rather than along a single path of predefined sets of stages. Most likely, the smallest decisions, the ones we never really understood that we made bear a much larger impact on the transitions in our lives than the ones we define as our moments of watershed. This is the case for people as much as for states and international institutions. However, it is also obvious that the cards in this world of ours are extremely unevenly dealt as the number of possibilities and chances varies immensely from one place to another.

What really separates one place or one case from another is what we may call the 'routinisation' of life based on horizontal linkages of formal and informal institutions that enables the privileged ones of us to wake up every morning to a new day where we can expect to face opportunities as well as challenges within an easily recognised frame of institutionalised societal norms that most members of societies as the one that we belong to accept without too much questioning. The result is a

relatively hassle-free society where people wake up, go to work, and can expect to return in the same way in the evening with money on their bank card and food on the table. The state is there all along the day, but its power and various manifestations is not something one needs to reflect on or ponder various strategies how to navigate or negotiate. It is mainly beneficial and not the least almost invisible. This is not necessarily the case in our case countries. The state is not necessarily just benevolent and while weaker it may also be much more of a present and manifest form of power in people's daily life. This can therefore not be addressed by formal parsimonious theory building or theory testing. What is needed is analytical eclecticism in our empirical investigations that through middle-range comparisons and theorisation can take us toward a social theory of social change.

Addressing the complexity and reciprocity of patron-client relationships in a hybrid state will illustrate this challenge. However, we must also account for oppositional and regime subversive activities, including the fact that in a place where the state is not almost invisible and mainly benevolent, but manifestly present and often causes trouble in people's daily lives, people may also develop the fine art of not being governed. This obvious has implications for how we should go about attempting to measure people's perceptions.

Patron and clients, but also oppositional activities and the fine art of not being governed

Neopatrimonial rule rests on complex social networks dominated by patron – client relationships. The challenge is that these relationships too often are seen as only hierarchical and top-down where the patron orders and the client try to implement whatever the patron wants. This is wrong. While patrons tend to be more powerful than the client, the patron needs clients to be a patron – a patron without clients is not a patron. This may sound simple, but it is not as it points to an important feature of states with a clear hybrid character: there is value in people. Clients and networks of clients therefore needs to be maintained and protected because without the capital of clients a patron could loose almost everything. This means that it is of uttermost importance in these types of political settings to maintain the value in people that you have attached to your position. The patron must therefore in several ways provide for his or hers clients while the clients either must seek to uphold the

position of the patron or seek 'greener pastures' under another patron. This provides for competition, competition for resources and power, but also for people. Thus, while the competition for power via the ballot box of the formal democratic system may be limited due to various forms of constraints that the incumbent regime has placed on formal oppositional activities, this does not mean that a society like this is not the scene of fierce political rivalry, and this is also a competition between patrons for people – in other words clients.

Some of these clients are of huge value to the patron and can be patron for lesser people, while others only have value as 'size' – people that can be mobilised when needed, for example for mass gatherings, public displays of support for the leader (read patron). No matter what is the case, the main point is that depending on the depth of hybridity in the state and the dominance of neopatrimonial rule over legal-bureaucratic rule in the state in question, these networks of patron-client relationships may have a limited reach (for example in the capital or in the secondary city) or they may encompass the state from the very 'throne' of political power all the way down to for example teachers at a municipality educational facility whose access to anything from school material to their own salary may depend on a series of patrons and clients above them. Such a system is therefore not just a system of extraction towards the top, but a combined system of extraction and redistribution. As such it is not that different from a regime of taxation in the ideal type of a Weberian state, the main difference is that while it takes place inside a state that in theory is guided by a legal bureaucratic logic, it is shaped by neopatrimonial practices.

Such a system of rule may seem weak and prone to instability, but there are several examples that such states can remain stable for a remarkably long period of time. Mobutu's Zaire is but one example, where the most intriguing question is not why the rebellion that brought Mobutu down finally happened in 1996, but how this rule was able to last almost three decades, and in most ways has been recreated by those that succeeded him. What this means is that even when a hybrid regime that has been guided by neopatrimonial practices falls there is no guarantee that new rulers – no matter their supposedly democratic credentials as opposition figures – are able or willing to constitute a clear break with the past. This is obvious in several cases in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans.

Obviously, resources are key to maintain any system of rule, hybrid rule included. However, while material resources are important, clever rulers also have a magnitude of narrative resources and identity markers to draw upon. This is particularly the case in states of certain degree of unsettledness. Wrongdoings of the past, perceived injustices, scapegoating a minority – particularly if one has access to one that can be marked as responsible for wrongdoings in the past and perceived injustices. Or simply amid the chaos and turmoil that many feel affect their lives due to the rapid changes experienced – construct a call for the return to traditional values where certain aspect of the contemporary Western European version of liberal democracy can be presented as alien to our way of life, almost as colonial force. No matter what, this becomes a challenge to the democracy promotion of an external actor like the EU who still mainly focuses on the formal sphere of politics and institutional life without perhaps having the context sensitivity needed to be prepared to work constructively on these issues. Thinking that this is only about a lack of knowledge and that people with limited understanding are manipulated by cynical leaders (that is not to say that leaders are not cynical) will not help as what is happening is that this becomes a multiverse of truths about space, place, belonging, and identity where what may seem strange and silly from the perspective of Brussels may be the reality of life for others.

This becomes even more complicated when we factor in the art of not being governed. People that live their lives in hybrid realities as the ones we have presented here, basically have three choices. First, they can find various ways of being clients or even lesser patrons, willingly or unwillingly becoming part of the regime's support base actively or passively. Life can thereby go on without too much hassle from the state. Life may not be thriving, but it is not necessarily one full of trouble either. Second, they may support available opposition forces. How much this affects their lives, will depend on a combination of the level of coercion and how actively and openly they embrace oppositional forces. Most often these will be younger people from the middle class with higher education and a relatively autonomous economic position vis-à-vis the regime in power, meaning that they can afford not being or becoming clients of the regime's patrons. These are often the people that various externally initiated democracy promotion programmes interact with. They speak the same language of contemporary Western liberal democracy and are at least often perceived by external actors that promotes this as having the same dreams and aspirations as they have. The latter is not always the case. There is

also a third option that one should be aware of and that is withdrawal – this is the fine art of not being governed. Segments of the population that either has given up on large scale change and prefer to construct their lives around lesser goals of simply being left in peace to pursue their lives silently and hidden away from the limelight of politics; or follows aspirations of change, but pursues these aspirations clandestine utilising a number of subversive strategies that neither are in sync with the formal political opposition or the contemporary liberalism of the EU. The art collective New Slovenian Art, the band Laibach, and the autonomous republic they declared in Ljubljana is one example of what type of phenomenon we should have an eye to in the case countries as they may help us illuminate social trends that we otherwise would miss and that external agents as the EU most certainly will.

How to measure public perceptions in a multiverse?

If the interaction between the EU, other external agents, and the case countries can be said to constitute a multiverse of interactions and response to interaction that again leads to new interactions etc., the question is how we can measure public perceptions. Obviously, we cannot rely on one method or a narrow methodology. We have already argued for analytical eclecticism as the guiding scientific principle for RE-ENGAGE and this must be followed up in the construction of our empirical methods. We must therefore follow a strategy of triangulation of data.

Obviously, we will do what is called key informant interviews (KIIs). This is relatively straight forward. We interview KIIs in Brussel, at the delegation level in the case countries, and politicians, bureaucrats, civil society organisation representatives, trade union representatives, traditional and religious leaders etc., but these more mainstream interviews should also be supplemented with what we call ‘life-history’ interviews that require another form of much more intimacy with the informant who in this method becomes a research interlocutor. The ‘life-history’ interview is much deeper than an ordinary KIIs interview. It last longer, sometimes in one longer session, other times in several session, depending on the circumstances. The starting point is the place where the researcher and interlocutor are, and then together they trace first backwards in time from their encounter and then forward again to their very meeting. The rationale is to come to a joint understanding of what

brought this encounter about and what it can tell us some the subject matter – in this case democracy promotion, hybridity, and question concerning vertical and horizontal trust. The interlocutor can represent any of the categories mentioned above or something else uncovered during the research process.

The same technique will also be used during the project process tracing (see below), but here the backward and forward tracing will follow the lines of the project being traced. In addition, this exercise will also include more traditional KIIs and focus group sessions. The latter will be more fully explained in the field manual and in the training sessions conducted during the inception of the fieldwork. This is important as focus group sessions and the social dynamics needed are not as easy to bring about as many believe them to be.

The final dimension of our operationalised methodology is the vignette surveys. Here we move from KIIs and carefully selected interlocutors for ‘life- history’ interviews to a random sample of the population in the capital and secondary city of each case country. The purpose here is to unlock through a standard questionnaire some general views about trust, about the state, but also about external actors, the EU, but also possibly competing powers as China, Russia, and Turkey, with the United States as a possible agent of disequilibrium due to the forthcoming presidential elections. The standard questionnaire format is supplemented with a vignette narrative section where the purpose is that by exposing the respondent to different narratives about the state, about who can be trusted, and about the role of external powers we can unlock some the different lines of ‘truths’ that co-exist in this multiverse, and thereby being better suited in our research to understand how public perceptions are formed in a state of hybridity. Below we offer a synopsis of how we plan to operationalise the empirical research that lies ahead. This will be more fully spelled out in the forthcoming revisions of the field manual.

Methods and research design

Comparative case study design and case selection

RE-ENGAGE suggests an innovative comparative study of political systems in which a transition to liberal democracy has been initiated. While some have made progress

consolidating democracy, others have seen their transition stall or even backslide. In cases of backsliding, the unpredictability of life and livelihoods creates a fertile breeding ground for (the reinvigoration of) patron–client relationships and neo patrimonial politics. This process is not necessarily linear, however, as states may achieve renewed progress after backsliding. To capture this, and in line with Goertz (2016), we conceptualise our multi-method approach as making cross-case causal inferences in combination with within-case qualitative inferences.

The project’s geographical focus is limited to the two regions in which the EU is engaged through the mechanisms of Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement: the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood. For our study, we have selected three cases in each region with significant variations in democratisation over the past decade (see V-Dem 2022).

Based on this design, we have selected three group of cases: one ‘frontrunner’, one which has experienced backsliding and one where the status is undetermined in each region. Based on evaluation reports about the state of democracy in the relevant states (see Scazzieri 2022), we suggest Albania is chosen for the Western Balkans and Moldova for the Eastern Neighbourhood as frontrunners. Frontrunners are defined as states where progress has been achieved on critical macro indicators of liberal democracy, such as free and fair elections in which results are either not contested or contested through procedures specified in the constitution. Frontrunner countries have also seen increases in press freedom and the space for autonomous civil society organisations.

In the next group of cases, we will select one state in each region where the democratisation process over the past decade has experienced ‘backsliding’ or ‘stalled’. This is the case in both Serbia and Georgia, which explains why the former has not progressed beyond being a candidate since 2012 and why the latter was not granted candidate status alongside Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022. By ‘backsliding’, we mean that a political process towards liberal democracy in 2023 appears blocked, together with indications of more authoritarian modes of governance. From our sample, Serbia is an example of backsliding. By ‘stalled’, we mean that liberal democracy promotion is unable to move forward due to prevailing social, economic and political conditions, rather than due to any specific actions by a clearly defined set of actors. Such as the case of Georgia in early 2023.

The third group of cases includes one country in each region where the outcome (for different reasons) is ‘undetermined’: Bosnia and Ukraine (although both obtained candidate status under the exceptional circumstances of 2022). Thus, our cross-case method is combined with individual cases to explore causal mechanisms that interfere with or influence EU democracy promotion initiatives in circumstances where other external actors are involved.

The six case countries identified above will be subject to detailed qualitative case studies, including survey experiments and project process tracing. To increase feasibility, we will focus on areas particularly relevant for democracy promotion, and in which EU external democracy promotion efforts are mostly channelled. While financial assistance for the media sector, political parties and parliamentary support has so far lagged behind sectors such as rule of law and civil society, this is now changing, with various pilot programmes being undertaken on strengthening multi-party systems and women’s role in political parties.

Democracy promotion can also take the form of negative interventions, namely punitive measures and sanctions, or less severely modest pressure aimed applied in combination with dialogue between governments and pro-democracy actors (Godfrey & Youngs 2019). Even so, the EU’s overwhelming focus remains on empowering reformers in ministries or regimes through assistance to formal state institutions, including support for national anticorruption authorities or promoting dialogue processes between governments and pro-democracy actors (Godfrey & Youngs 2019: 18–20). How such programmes function in societies characterised by neo patrimonial and/or hybrid governance structures is unknown. There is, therefore, a risk that they may inadvertently reinforce non-democratic forces.

RE-ENGAGE will study the EU’s democracy support towards both state and non-state actors. In terms of state actors, we will investigate programmes targeting the justice sector and rule of law, gathering data on how the programmes function in states with varying hybrid governance structures and how they are challenged/supported by the engagement of other external actors. For non-state actors, meanwhile, we will focus on media and civil society, political parties, religious actors, and the participation of women, youths and minorities. Here, we will study dynamics at both the national and the local level across a series of dimensions, including the degree and character of participation, transparency, and accountability.

A five-step multi-method approach

Investigating the impact and legitimacy of EU-led democratisation efforts necessitates in-depth studies of the Union's approach over time and in different regions (see also Börzel & van Hüllen 2014; Dannreuther 2006; Freyburg et al 2009; Kelley 2006; Lavenex 2004; Lavenex & Schimmelfennig 2009). Building on existing research, RE-ENGAGE will provide an up-to-date, novel empirical analysis based on an innovative multi-method framework.

Conducting a multi-method analysis that incorporates different methodological approaches and evidence types will increase the credibility of the findings. RE-ENGAGE's empirical work is therefore designed around an analytical framework that combines innovative categorisation of the regime types under study with micro-quantitative and in-depth qualitative research. The main approach will be six country-specific case studies drawing on political ethnography, supplemented by micro-level perception surveys and detailed project process tracing studies. We will include foresight studies of Russia, China, and Turkey's future involvement in the two regions and how it is likely to affect the EU's democracy promotion strategies and, in turn, the outcomes of its enlargement and neighbourhood policies, including attempts to assist countries in becoming more resilient to hybrid warfare and misinformation campaigns initiated by third-party countries.

We will proceed methodologically in a stepwise process. First, we will implement data gathering at the EU level, conducting interviews and other forms of data collection in the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission (DG NEAR). This will enable us to understand current EU thinking about external democracy promotion, as well as if and how this thinking has changed over time and whether it has been challenged by democratic backsliding in certain member states. This work will begin in tandem with an analysis of actual and potential EU candidates, shedding light on their key features and logic of operation. Second, and simultaneously, we will conduct an initial analysis of the role played by Russia, China, and Turkey in our case countries. Beyond deepening our understanding of EU involvement, we require precise knowledge of the state, nature, and size of these strategic external actors' involvement, as their activities may undermine the EU's democratisation efforts (Bader, Grävingholt & Kaetner 2019;

Chou 2016, Sejersen 2019, Weyland 2017). The third step will be the qualitative case studies of the six selected countries, which will provide rich data on the implementation of EU policies, how this is impacted by the competing policies and programmes of other external actors, and how in turn, according to our foresight analysis, EU programming is likely to be impacted in the short-to-medium term. These studies will inform the fourth step, which will consist of project process tracing analysis and micro-level vignette survey experiments. This will enable us to make distinctly different types of data talk to each other, preparing the ground for the fifth and final step, the comparative analysis, which will lead both to academic articles and RE-ENGAGE's final policy recommendations.

Step 1: Interviews and document analysis in Brussels

It is important to start the analysis with an up-to-date understanding of how the ongoing revision of the neighbourhood policy and accession process is being perceived in Brussels. Having undergone several phases and revisions in the past, these policies have become a top priority for the EU following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with further adjustments and revisions currently taking place. To capture these ongoing changes in these specific policies and how they relate to other foreign policy initiatives such as the European political Community as well as other policies that aims at strengthening the wider European security community against threats of different kinds, a series of interviews with EEAS, and Commission (DG NEAR) officials, will be undertaken. In addition, we will conduct a systematic study (qualitative and quantitative) of relevant EU documents and budgets, providing us with a thorough review of the Union's overall engagement in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood.

Step 2: Foresight studies of external actors' engagement

The strategic external actors, included in the foresight analysis, will be Russia, China and Turkey. Drawing on the initial assessment made of their involvement in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood, we will produce a general

strategic foresight analysis of their future regional involvement in the medium-to-long term. The foresight methodology applied will generate exploratory narratives of the future based on available intelligence and foreknowledge (Kuosa 2016; Costanzo and MacKay 2009; Schwarz 2023). In line with how it is deployed in EU decision making, RE-ENGAGE's use of strategic foresight will anticipate future trends, design efficient policies and boost shock resilience (European Commission, undated). The foresight analysis is premised on the notion that while the future is unknown and may feature significant complexity, it can nevertheless be subject to disciplined, non-deterministic scientific inquiry (Neumann and Øverland 2004: 265).

Next, we will adapt and apply state-of-the-art scenario-building methodology (van der Heijden 1996; Ringland 2002) to the subject matter of hybrid regimes, allowing us to develop scenarios of strategic actor engagement in individual case study countries. The methodology will harness local knowledge to avoid superficial downscaling (Özkaynak & Rodríguez-Labajos 2010), while the scenarios will be designed as consistent and reasonably likely – although structurally differentiated – narratives about the future (van der Heijden 1996: 29), with frames and cues that allow them to act as sensemaking devices (Walton, O’Kane & Ruwhiu 2019). The scenarios will be descriptive (i.e. what can happen) rather than normative and explorative (i.e. predictive) (cf. Borjeson et al 2006), and constructed from predetermined elements, drivers ordered by probability and importance, and critical uncertainties. They will feature early indicators as observable and measurable characteristics, allowing us to establish whether a scenario is becoming a reality, or a wild card understood as an unlikely, yet significant event, that would disrupt the causal mechanisms included in the scenario (Bernstein et al. 2000). Shorter narratives based on selected scenarios will be utilised in the vignette survey experiments (see below) as representations of possible future(s) to which respondents can be introduced. Moreover, along with the general strategic foresight, they will be used to ‘wind tunnel’ (van den Heijden 1996) the EU’s policy plans and strategies and formulate concrete policy recommendations for dealing with the effects of strategic external actor engagement.

Step 3: Qualitative micro studies

In the country case studies, we mainly utilise existing data to plot the evolution of the political regimes since the end of the Cold War. In these studies, we first pay particular attention to the quality of democracy, the constellation of political actors and the level of trust between the elites and the population and between various population groups. This gives us an understanding of both vertical and horizontal trust and thereby how social cohesion has evolved over time. In the second part, we will conduct a similar timeline analysis of both EU engagement and what role competing external actors have played. Together, this provides a grounded understanding of how these regimes operate, the level of hybridity over time and the role played both by the EU and other external actors and the extent to which the latter has sought to undermine the EU's role.

Step 4: Quantitative micro studies

To find out how local needs can be better taken into consideration in the making of EU policies, we need both to understand how EU projects have been implemented and perceived locally. For this we need to gather new information, and this will be done through an approach of project process tracing that will be followed by a targeted vignette survey experiment.

In the project process tracing, we will identify two to four specific EU interventions in each case country that can be categorised as democracy assistance, with the selection based both on the degree of democracy assistance and on levels of financial support from the EU over time. Next, we will identify peak periods and breaks in EU support over time and, based on this analysis, conduct qualitative interviews with both the EU personnel involved in this support and the local stakeholders at the receiving end. Key questions underlying this research include: How do these two groups understand the process? How do they understand key periods in the project process? And how do they evaluate impact over time? The project process tracing will have to begin before implementation of the vignette surveys, as projects will be selected based on levels of EU financial support, and key EU personnel and stakeholders must be identified a priori. This will enrich the data collection and

subsequent analysis, as the researchers will be informed about both process and outcomes in real time. In accounting for the critical challenges facing successful EU engagement on the ground, we will incorporate best practices in the project process tracing methodology, including various diagnostic tests for causal inference and data triangulation techniques (Mahoney 2012; Waldner 2015).

The micro-quantitative, survey-based portion of RE-ENGAGE's research contributes a bottom-up perspective, assessing citizens' views on the actors, targets, and tools of external democracy promotion and thereby how they understand the quality and depth (or the lack of) social cohesion. Thus, the vignette survey-based analysis will provide in-depth insights into the perceptions and preferences of local populations (minorities and marginalised groups included), enabling lessons to be drawn on success factors and barriers to EU democracy promotion in different contexts.

Vignette survey-based analysis combines a survey questionnaire structure with a vignette section that introduces respondents to various scenarios and outcomes through pictures, narratives, or a combination of both. This method will enable systematic exploration of citizens' preferences regarding external democracy support, in turn facilitating more targeted EU democracy promotion measures that consider local needs and perceptions. Through representative sampling we will be able to collect observational data on the determinants of citizens' views of external democracy promotion, and so evaluate the interplay between democratic support and alternative considerations. Respondents will be introduced to a variety of vignette narratives concerning EU democracy support interventions and asked to review possible pre-defined outcome scenarios. Based on the response chosen, we will introduce an alternative outcome in which an external power such as China, Russia and Turkey also play a role, and ask the interviewee to evaluate the likelihood of this outcome and how it impacts their view of the efficiency and legitimacy of the EU's democracy support intervention. This offers the possibility of analysing direct trade-offs between democracy and stability, or security concerns and the specific modalities of external support. Moreover, it allows us to address the role of other external powers as potential competitors to the EU.

Our survey will comprise general questions on respondents' perceptions of democracy (diffuse support and specific support for democracy in their own country), countrywide and individual socio-economic conditions, social cohesion,

and hybridity, as well as different external actors active in their country. While we cannot achieve national representativity in our case countries, we will aim for two distinct samples in each case country: one from the national capital and one from a 'secondary city' (Markusen et al 1999). The secondary city is defined as major city that historically has existed, and continues to exist, in a state of competition/conflict, often due to a sense of being disregarded/disadvantaged vis-à-vis the capital. The secondary city is geographically distinct, with a certain physical distance between it and the national capital. Its trade and foreign relations are often somewhat autonomous of the capital, and it carries a certain ambivalence, as it is a periphery to the centre (capital), but itself a centre in the periphery. The secondary city's socio-economic and political culture is distinct from the capital, and, as they are generally located towards the margins of the state, there is often room for improvisation in the form of local commerce, trade routes and sometimes even smuggling networks. For the selection of secondary cities in the case countries see the field manual.

The main innovative element of our surveys is the embedded vignette experiment. While such experiments are becoming increasingly widespread as a means of assessing multidimensional political preferences (Zhirkov 2021), their use in the field of democracy promotion remains limited (Escribà-Folch et al. 2021).

Our vignette experiment will probe respondents' preferences regarding the actors, targets, and tools of external democracy promotion, with specific attributes in these categories defined in consultation with RE-ENGAGE partners in the selected case countries, thereby ensuring maximum local sensitivity. As already described, in terms of actors, we will include the EU alongside relevant alternative actors, such as Russia, China and Turkey, allowing us to address the growing competition the Union is facing from third actors (Börzel 2015; Freyburg & Richter 2015; Risse & Babayan 2015). Regarding targets, we plan to separate out activities aimed more specifically at democracy promotion, such as creating institutions or developing legislative frameworks, from broader development support, such as infrastructure projects, socio-economic support, or security assistance. This will allow us to account for the growing tension between the democracy support and stabilisation characteristics of EU involvement in these regions (Richter & Wunsch 2020). Finally, we will probe the tools employed to support local democratisation efforts, distinguishing between more conventional top-down instruments such as conditionality; peer-to-peer support via expert-level exchanges; and inclusive approaches involving local civil

society actors and other stakeholders potentially affected by implemented changes. Our design choices broadly map onto the distinctions between leverage, linkage, and governance support.

Step 5: Comparative analysis

The four steps above will yield six rich datasets from the case countries. These findings will be reported as policy briefs and working papers throughout the study process and provide the basis for the continued dissemination of RE-ENGAGE's research. In the comparative analysis, we will mine these deliverables, comparing findings on hybridity, social cohesion, resilience and democratic backsliding with the EU's democracy assistance/promotion efforts, and how this has been and is likely to be impacted by external powers such as Russia, China and Turkey. This analysis will consist not only of a comparative pairing of frontrunners, backsliders and undetermined countries from the two regions, but also a comparative matrix that makes possible a more dynamic drawing of lessons between differently categorised case countries. This will enable us to tease out best practice policy implications for the EU irrespective of whether the country in question is defined as a front runner, backslider or undetermined, and to conduct comparative foresight analysis of third power involvement based on different political development scenarios. The comparative analysis phase will therefore produce both RE-ENGAGE's final working papers, academic articles, and the final policy recommendations.

Preliminary conclusions: towards social theory

Everything is social and everything is socially constructed in one way or another. This does not mean that material resources, infrastructure, and institutions are not important. They are, but how we think about them, how we think about the state, our lives within the state, and what we wish for in this regard is socially constructed by our lived experiences and those that our lives make us relate to. For some the EU is an institution to relate to and prospective membership of the Union is something

one aspires to. For others this may look more like a threat to their current power and position, while for yet others the dream has waned, the light has failed as Krastev & Holmes (2019) would say. How one is placed in this triangle of aspirations, threats and disillusionment depends on how one has experienced the process of both the evolution of the state in which one lives and the Union's involvement. Each of these experiences will carry forward narratives of space, place, belonging, and respective identity makers that are both pulled by the weight of history and driven by hopes for the future.

If we are to make sense of the data that each of the methods that will utilise will give us, we cannot just rely on international relations theory, foreign policy analysis or EU studies. We need the insight that these provide, but we just as much need area studies of the Eastern Neighbourhood countries and the states of the Western Balkans. Insights from sociology and anthropology is also needed, and when we start dwelling into understanding how perceptions are formed and shaped, we need in addition guidance from social psychology. Analytical eclecticism must therefore be our main methodological guidance as we have the ambitions of not only providing useful policy analysis and recommendations for the EU, but also contribute to the making of a social theory that traverses the levels and labels of mainstream social science. Our aim is therefore to contribute to theory building for a world that looks less and less as a coherent universe and more and more as a multiverse.

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