

D4.1. The impact of the war in Ukraine on EU's policies and instruments in the neighbourhood



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:	Report
Deliverable number:	D4.1.
Deliverable title:	The impact of the war in Ukraine on EU's policies and instruments in the neighbourhood
Due date of deliverable:	31 July 2024
Actual submission date:	31 July 2024
Editors:	Kim Butson, Adam Harrison
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Reviewers:	Pernille Rieker
Participating beneficiaries:	
Work Package no.:	WP4
Work Package title:	EU instruments and policies
Work Package leader:	ECFR
Work Package participants:	ECFR, NUPI, IIR
Estimated person-months for deliverable:	3
Dissemination level:	PU
Nature:	Background paper
Version:	1
Draft/Final:	Final
No of pages (including cover):	51
Keywords:	Democracy promotion, EU policies, EU Enlargement



POLICY BRIEF

THE INTEREST OF VALUES: THE EU'S DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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SUMMARY

- Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine brought a new geopolitical urgency to EU enlargement. The EU now faces the task of balancing that urgency with the need to help aspiring members in the Western Balkans and the eastern neighbourhood transform into genuine liberal democracies.
- Indeed, the EU's imperative to ensure it remains a community of resilient democracies means democracy promotion in candidate countries is a key geopolitical interest for the bloc.
- The policies and instruments the EU has deployed in pursuit of democracy promotion in its neighbourhood – primarily the enlargement policy and eastern neighbourhood policy – hold several important lessons for the post-2022 round of enlargement.
- The EU will need to apply its conditionality more consistently and predictably. It will also need to approach cooperation with 'hybrid' regimes in both regions in a



more principled way, by supporting civil society and non-state initiatives to bring about change ‘from below’.

- But democracy promotion starts at home – and the EU will need to address its own rule of law crises to prevent systemic competition between autocracies and democracies reaching further into the bloc, potentially hollowing it out from within.



Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine spectacularly hammered the final nail into the coffin of the post-cold war era. The return of a large-scale conventional war to Europe buried three main assumptions that had guided the European Union's policymaking in its eastern and south-eastern neighbourhoods since the early 1990s (Bøås, Giske, and Rieker, 2024). The first of these was that cooperation alone could ensure security and stability on the European continent. The second was that such cooperation would be fostered by the inevitable – if not linear – transition of former “people's democracies” to genuine liberal democracies. Finally, the invasion finished off the idea that the EU's cooperation with these states should focus mainly on encouraging and accompanying them on that path towards stable, resilient democracies: they also needed protection from and stronger defences against foreign malign influence and aggression (Bøås, Giske, and Rieker, 2024).

Since the 1990s, the EU had underpinned its engagement in the Western Balkans and the eastern neighbourhood with the premise that these three ideas were interrelated: democratisation would turn these countries into cooperative partners that, in turn, contributed to Europe's stability and security. The EU therefore deployed various policies and instruments to promote and hasten its neighbours' democratic transitions (Bøås, Giske, and Rieker, 2024).

This democracy promotion is a key element of the EU's enlargement policy (European Council, n.d.-b), which has itself been central to the way the bloc conceives of its relationships with its neighbours. Prior to 2022, the EU tackled democracy promotion in Western Balkans states mainly in the framework of that enlargement policy (even though not all of them enjoyed formal candidate status). In eastern Europe, on the other hand, the bloc did not initially envisage EU membership for the countries in question. It therefore pursued greater alignment with EU norms and values through its eastern partnership policy (EEAS, 2022a) – at least in part to avoid confrontation with Russia.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine superseded that division, with the EU granting candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine in June 2022 (Parker et al., 2022) and then to Georgia in December 2023 (Bellamy, 2023). These decisions were a signal of the

EU's commitment to the security of the eastern neighbourhood. But they also brought enlargement in general firmly back onto the EU's agenda after years of stagnation and fatigue. The implication is that all these countries will eventually become EU member states and should therefore comply with the Copenhagen criteria (EUR-Lex, n.d.-a) – the set of rules and standards that aim to ensure the EU remains a community of liberal democracies.

The EU's renewed vigour for enlargement means its efforts to promote democracy in both the Western Balkans and the eastern neighbourhood are now exceptional cases: compared to the EU's foreign policy engagement with other parts of the world, but also compared to how other international organisations such as the United Nations pursue democracy promotion in these regions. Other organisations promote democracy based purely on values (United Nations, n.d.), without being affected themselves by the nature of the political regimes in the countries they work with. But the EU's goal within its enlargement policy is to transform and prepare countries to join a political and economic union that shares and defends common values, benefiting both the EU and the candidate countries. Enlargement is therefore a transformative process both for the candidate countries and for the EU; the consolidation of democracy and rule of law in the candidate countries before they join helps to ensure that the EU will remain a community of democracies.

In this paper, we examine the EU's efforts to promote democracy in three countries in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia) and three in eastern Europe (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). We first take a closer look at the shift in the EU's engagement with its neighbours in response to Russia's war against Ukraine. This underlines that democracy promotion is a key geopolitical interest for the EU – and not just a matter of values. We then map a variety of policies and instruments that the EU has used to promote democracy in the two regions since the early 2000s. Finally, we set out some lessons the EU can learn from its previous efforts at democracy promotion in the Western Balkans and eastern neighbourhood and how it can begin to build on these to achieve its geopolitical goals.

In selecting these policies, we adopted a broad definition of democracy as outlined by researchers Bøås, Giske, and Osland (2024). Accordingly, democracy encompasses not only a high-quality, free, and fair multi-party electoral process but also respect for human rights and key elements of good governance, such as the rule of law and accountability. A well-functioning democracy creates conditions for

trust from societies to state institutions, and gains legitimacy by providing physical and economic safety and creating conditions for economic growth and a promising future for citizens (Bøås, Giske, and Osland, 2024).

But the EU's efforts may not have always contributed favourably to this outcome. The bloc's instruments and policies become part of the political economies of its partner countries and contribute to shaping them, by creating opportunities and constraints for decision-makers and other political actors. This could, in turn, result in unexpected and sometimes adverse effects (Bøås, Giske, and Rieker, 2024).

Russia's war and the return of enlargement

The return of enlargement touches on two issues of fundamental importance to the EU's identity: its role and self-definition as a geopolitical actor and its transformative power as a promoter of democracy and rule of law.

Geopolitics undoubtedly lies at the heart of the bloc's rediscovered enthusiasm for enlargement. As early as 2019, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen had described the commission's mandate as "geopolitical", recognising the changing international environment as a defining issue for the EU's identity (European Commission, 2019). Russia's 2022 invasion then demonstrated that, as long as countries in the Western Balkans and eastern neighbourhood were not integrated with the EU, they would remain vulnerable to foreign interference or even outright aggression.

This led the EU and its member states to shift their perspective on enlargement. The bloc's earlier focus on the economic, demographic, and political challenges of integrating new members had resulted in 20 years of 'enlargement stasis'. This was consistent with the EU's preoccupation with internal dynamics following a series of crises, from the 2008 financial turmoil, through Brexit, to the covid-19 pandemic. The stagnation also reflected a lack of pressure from member states on the EU to integrate the Western Balkans and from the EU on the Western Balkans states to undertake the necessary reforms. But the full-scale invasion of Ukraine introduced a new notion of geopolitical urgency. Enlargement thus shifted from a policy that aimed to integrate candidate countries into a common space of freedom and shared values to one that focused on protecting them (and the EU) against foreign interference and aggression.

While the EU's geopolitical maturity remains more a matter of aspiration than reality, the other identity question at stake – the bloc's role as democracy promoter – is part of its DNA. The EU was conceived as a beacon of democratic values; enlargement has traditionally been the bloc's most powerful instrument to extend the reach of those values beyond its borders. It is through leading by example and exporting its fundamental norms that the EU has expanded its influence and contributed to democratic reforms in its neighbourhood. As long as external powers did not actively and massively contest the EU's standards on democracy and rule of law, this approach could even have served as a substitute for the bloc's geopolitical orientation.

Clearly, previous rounds of EU enlargement were also motivated by geopolitics: a stable and secure Europe has always been an objective of enlargement policy (European Commission, n.d.-a). But, until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU's focus on norms and values helped it ignore uncomfortable geopolitical realities even once they became quite apparent (for instance, with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014).

This all changed with the EU's decision to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status in June 2022, driven more by security considerations than progress on democratic reforms. The pace at which the EU took subsequent steps raised eyebrows (for instance, the European Council's decision to open accession negotiations in December 2023 and their launch in June 2024), most notably in the Western Balkans (Sorgi, 2023). Moreover, some commentators have expressed concerns that the EU could sacrifice its identity as a democracy promoter on the altar of its geopolitical ambitions (Schwarzer, 2024).

But European leaders and EU policymakers have repeatedly stressed that their geopolitical motivations will in no way undermine the bloc's democracy and rule of law credentials. At the October 2023 European Council summit in Granada, von der Leyen made clear it was the progress countries made in aligning their laws with EU rules and standards that should dictate the pace of membership, not an arbitrary deadline (Al Jazeera, 2023). The European Commission's November 2023 enlargement package balanced geopolitics with a clear commitment also to ensuring accession was based on merit (Grabbe, 2023a). The conclusions of the December 2023 EU summit reiterated how "aspiring members need to step up their reform efforts, notably in the area of rule of law, in line with the merit-based nature

of the accession process and with the assistance of the EU” (European Council, 2023).

Combining geopolitics and democracy promotion

Indeed, for the EU to succeed as a larger community of democracies, it will need to approach its ‘aspiring geopolitical player’ and ‘democracy promoter’ identities as more – not less – intertwined.

The reasons for this are manifold.

Firstly, rule of law and democratic standards can help increase social resilience against foreign influence (Azariev North et al., 2024). A lack of democracy and rule of law opens up vulnerabilities that external actors can exploit. This is often the case in “hybrid regimes” – political systems in which rule of law is lacking and state institutions are dysfunctional or inefficient due to corruption and a high level of political clientelism (Bøås, Giske, and Osland, 2024). In these systems civil society is often weak and media freedom limited, all of which increases societies’ vulnerability towards malign foreign influences such as disinformation and propaganda.

Secondly, the assumption that autocratic or hybrid regimes are guarantors of long-term stability often proves to be wrong. Serbia and Georgia illustrate this, as both countries are experiencing significant democratic backsliding and domestic tensions (Bechev, 2024; Fix & Kapp, 2023). Power competition between democracies and autocracies also makes hybrid regimes more vulnerable to Chinese and Russian influence than democracies, which contradicts European interests (Cvetkovic & Heil, 2024). Moreover, the still-powerful democratic aspirations of civil society in countries such as Georgia (Howard, 2024) do not bode well for ‘authoritarian stability’: social unrest that undermines the legitimacy of authoritarian leaders creates conditions for unpredictability, and not long-term engagement with the EU.

Thirdly, the EU has experienced its own crises of democracy and rule of law – in particular in Hungary and Poland (Zgut-Przybylska, 2023). This demonstrates the pitfalls of democratic backsliding and the risks that poses to the bloc’s internal order. If enlargement is a geopolitical tool that aims to increase the EU’s resilience, its leaders will need to pay even more attention to the quality of democratic

standards in prospective member states to avoid a destabilisation of the bloc from within.

Democracy promotion in the Western Balkans and eastern neighbourhood is therefore a key geopolitical interest for the EU.

Democracy promotion in the Western Balkans and the eastern neighbourhood

The EU's policies in the Western Balkans and eastern neighbourhood are designed to promote and defend the EU's fundamental principles, such as peace and security, and respect for rights and freedoms (European Union, 2007). As one EU official we interviewed for this paper pointed out, the democracy-related priorities within the bloc's multiple policies and initiatives focus on supporting free elections; the effectiveness of parliaments in ensuring checks and balances and political plurality; and supporting civil society, including organisations, media, and independent investigative journalists.¹

In the Western Balkans, the key policies are the EU's stabilisation and association process (SAP), which established a framework for cooperation between the EU and the countries in the Western Balkans as early as 1999 (European Commission, n.d.-b), and then enlargement policy since 2004. In Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, the key policies are the eastern partnership (EaP), introduced in 2009 as part of the European neighbourhood policy (ENP) which paved the way for association agreements (AAs) that offered closer integration with the EU but not future membership (Council of the EU, n.d.-a).

Within these policies, the EU has placed increasing emphasis on rule of law in its efforts at democracy promotion. This is particularly the case within the enlargement framework since 2020, when the EU adopted its revised enlargement methodology. This methodology introduced benchmarks and grouped negotiating chapters into clusters, elevating the "Fundamentals – Rule of Law" to become the most important cluster for negotiating with a candidate country (European Commission, 2020). The aim was to ensure candidate countries had the cornerstones in place upon which

¹ Authors' interview with an EU official, Brussels, June 2024.

they could build and strengthen reforms in other areas. But internal developments within the EU also influenced its change of emphasis, such as the rise of illiberal governance in Austria as early as 1999 (Grabbe, 2017), and later in Hungary and Poland, which threatened the EU's core values and its overall functioning.

In both regions, the EU has employed a dual approach to democracy promotion. This strategy includes providing direct support for government institutions to implement reforms alongside support for civil society and independent media. Within its overall financial assistance for democracy, the EU has usually prioritised the former type of support and focused its efforts on rule of law over human rights and fundamental freedoms (see annexe I). This emphasis on rule of law is also visible in the allocation of funding at the project level. Projects related to rule of law tend to have budgets that range from €6 to €34m per country and implementation periods of more than three years. Projects that target civil society enjoy less funding – with budgets of under €2m and implementation periods between 2-4 years (see annexe II). This disparity is largely because investments in the rule of law require the strengthening of existing institutions or the establishment of new ones, as well as investments in administrative capacities. But it also reflects the EU's greater emphasis on governance and institution-building.

In terms of assistance for civil society organisations that defend human rights and fundamental freedoms, the EU works through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EUR-Lex, n.d.-b) and the European Endowment for Democracy (European Endowment for Democracy, n.d.). It has also extended participation in programmes such as Horizon 2020, Creative Europe, Erasmus+, Customs 2020, Europe for Citizens, TAIEX and Twinning to countries in both regions (European Union, 2022). According to some EU officials, participation in educational and cultural programmes such as these can indirectly contribute to democracy. This is due to an awareness-raising effect among participants of exposure to the benefits of a well-functioning democracy and EU membership.²

While the EU's priorities for strengthening democracy have remained consistent across both regions, the intensity and nature of the EU's engagement were shaped by distinct objectives prior to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

² Authors' interviews with EU officials, Brussels, June 2024.

Western Balkans

From the early 2000s the EU's goal in the Western Balkans was integration, and democracy promotion was closely tied to the accession process. This meant that the EU's leverage to promote democracy and induce concrete change was strong in the Western Balkans, as countries were subject to a demanding process in which their progress towards EU accession depended on fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria. This first of these conditions requires countries to have “stable institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities” (EUR-Lex, n.d.-a). But even with this most powerful incentive – the prospect of EU membership – the EU has struggled to significantly enhance democratic practices in the Western Balkans.

The legacy of wars following the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s prompted a decade of EU engagement with the Western Balkans that prioritised conflict prevention and stability (Ioannides, 2018). During the wars and in the immediate aftermath, the EU emphasised humanitarian relief and aid for refugees and displaced persons. It also undertook post-conflict political mediation in Bosnia (Dayton talks) (OSCE, n.d.), Kosovo (Status talks) (OSCE, 2007), and Macedonia (Ohrid agreement) (United Nations Peacemaker, 2001) and helped secure Montenegro's peaceful independence from Serbia in 2006 (BBC, 2023). Since Kosovo's declaration of independence, the EU has led as a facilitator of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue on the normalisation of relations (EEAS, 2022b). The bloc also supported peacebuilding efforts in the region by deploying civilian and military missions under the European security and defence policy – a forerunner of the common security and defence policy (EEAS, 2022c).

As the Western Balkans began to achieve conditions conducive to peace, the EU deepened its political engagement in the region to include policies aimed at supporting democratisation and encouraging economic development. For instance, initiatives such as the stability pact for south-eastern Europe – which preceded the Regional Cooperation Council (Regional Cooperation Council, n.d.) – paved the way for progress on cooperation among Western Balkans states, including on trade liberalisation and facilitation. This culminated with the Western Balkans' membership of the Central European Free Trade Agreement in 2006 (European Commission, 2024).

However, the EU's breakthrough policy in the region was the SAP within which it concluded stabilisation and association agreements (European Commission, n.d.-b). This established a framework for an institutional partnership between the EU and Western Balkans countries, opening the way towards EU membership. This prospect of future EU membership was confirmed at the Thessaloniki summit in 2003.

From this point forward the EU's main policy for the Western Balkans became enlargement policy, and all its instruments and programmes focused on supporting countries in their accession path. The enlargement policy for the Western Balkans builds upon the SAP, which emphasised stability as a central aspect of its regional engagement. This emphasis was also evident in the EU's priorities for the SAP's financial instruments: community assistance for reconstruction, development, and stabilisation and the instrument for pre-accession assistance (IPA) (European Commission, n.d.-c). In the early phase of the EU's engagement, these instruments largely focused on creating the conditions for cooperation among Western Balkans states, overcoming the legacies of war, improving neighbourly relations, and fostering economic development.

The tendency for the EU to prioritise stability through regional cooperation and promote democratisation through stability is also reflected in its framework agreements with SAP countries. The first clue is in the name: stabilisation and association agreements (SAAs) – instead of simply 'association agreements'. Secondly, while democracy and rule of law feature as central principles in these agreements, Western Balkans countries have been subject to additional political conditionality that went beyond Copenhagen criteria. That is, the EU has established good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation as preconditions for countries to deepen their relationship with the EU and advance in their accession process (European Commission, n.d.-c).

Eastern neighbourhood

In the eastern neighbourhood before 2022, the EU's primary aim was greater political and economic rapprochement. This meant its democracy promotion focused on good governance and alignment with the bloc's values. Until Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine, there was no consensus among EU member states that Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine would one day join the bloc. While some member

states were wary of confrontation with Russia in the region, the primary reason for this was reservations about enlargement more broadly.

After the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, the EU's engagement with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine was initially modest. The bloc focused on technical assistance and post-conflict rehabilitation rather than political dialogue or EU association (Jawad, 2006). In the late 1990s, the EU began to formalise its relationships with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine through partnership and cooperation agreements. These agreements focused on promoting harmonious economic relations between the EU and its neighbours.

But the EU's 'big bang' enlargement in 2004 incorporated ten new countries from central Europe and the Baltic states, bringing Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine geographically closer to the EU. This prompted the EU to establish the ENP in 2003 and form partnerships with countries in the eastern and southern neighbourhoods. The aim was to prevent new dividing lines emerging between the enlarged EU and its neighbours.

To deepen and strengthen ties with the eastern neighbourhood, the EU launched the EaP within its ENP in 2009. The bloc aimed this policy at Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, with the objective of promoting economic integration and political association with the EU, as well as cooperation among the six countries. The EaP emphasised rule of law, human rights, and democracy as the basis for partnership with the EU (Council of the EU, 2009). Within the EaP framework, the bloc also offered closer association without EU membership to willing partners by introducing AAs. Within these agreements the EU placed an even stronger focus on adherence to democratic values, stipulating that negotiations for AAs would commence only upon sufficient progress in democracy, rule of law, and human rights (Commission of the European Communities, 2008). Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine signed AAs with the EU in 2014.

The AAs were an ambitious move from the EU, which at the time was pursuing a rather cautious rapprochement with countries to the east. According to the EU officials we interviewed for this paper, concluding the agreements was far from an easy task.³ This was the case especially for Ukraine, whose leadership at the time of

³ Authors' interviews with EU officials, Brussels, 2024.

the negotiations was closely connected to Russia and less inclined to undertake democratic reforms and associate more closely with the EU.

Following significant pressure from Russia to join its Eurasian integration project (including the Eurasian Customs Union and Single Economic Space), Ukraine's then-president Viktor Yanukovich postponed the signing of the AA with the EU (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2014), triggering Ukraine's "Euromaidan" protests or the "Revolution of dignity". The final negotiated agreement for Ukraine was less ambitious than Georgia's and Moldova's, reflecting Yanukovich's resistance and Russian pressure.

Despite that difference, the agreements – alongside Russia's aggressive policies – contributed to consolidating pro-European sentiment in Moldova and Ukraine (Thompson, 2023). These sentiments intensified in Ukraine with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the war that started in the Donbas region shortly thereafter (Thompson, 2023). The EU also facilitated alignment with EU values through additional policies that served as incentives, such as visa-free travel agreements between the EU and Moldova in 2014, and Georgia and Ukraine in 2017 (European Commission, n.d.-d).

The EU's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, noted in a 2021 speech to the European Parliament that "our reinforced cooperation with our Eastern Partners and support to democracy remain on top of the European Union's interest. We cannot be an island of democracy in a world of autocracies." (EEAS, 2021). This demonstrates the EU's clear ambition prior to Russia's all-out invasion to nurture closer cooperation with its neighbours to the east. But, as discussed, it was only after February 2022 that the three countries became formal candidates.

Lessons for the future

The EU's democracy promotion is not a standalone, linear policy but a component of bigger policies guided by the EU's changing priorities and complex regional contexts. Between 2007 and 2022, internal challenges such as the financial crisis, the rise of the far right, the migration crisis, Brexit, and the covid-19 pandemic shifted the EU's focus away from enlargement and engagement with its neighbours. Both regions subsequently experienced a stagnation in reforms. But the EU's renewed commitment to enlargement since 2022 could revitalise democracy promotion and strengthen the EU's geopolitical position in its neighbourhood.

Its previous efforts offer several lessons in this regard.

Aim for clarity and consistency in conditionality

The EU accession process should drive candidate countries' transformations into stable democracies. But the EU limits its transformative power if it does not apply the conditionality principle in a consistent way (Grabbe, 2023b). Georgia and Serbia, for example, have experienced state capture, widespread corruption, and democratic backsliding in recent years. But both countries have nevertheless managed to advance their EU integration status. The EU opened a new cluster of negotiations with Serbia in 2021 (European Commission, n.d.-e); Georgia was granted candidate status in 2023.

In addition, the EU has applied conditionality beyond the Copenhagen criteria in the Western Balkans countries from the very start of the process. This aligned with the EU's priorities for the region, which initially focused on ensuring post-war stability, fostering good neighbourly relations, and encouraging regional cooperation. Indeed, the EU designed the integration process for the Western Balkans to help its partners resolve lingering issues stemming from the legacy of the wars – for example, by including conditions such as cooperation with international tribunals for war crimes and later the resolution of issues between Kosovo and Serbia. But this complicated the enlargement process, likely slowing down progress on democratic reforms for some countries in the region. The bloc has also imposed extra conditionality on some Western Balkans candidates due to bilateral disputes with existing EU member states, which shifted the emphasis away from democratic reforms and made the process less predictable for candidate countries.

Conditionality related to the EU's democracy promotion in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine followed a 'more-for-more' principle. Since EU membership was not on the cards for the three countries until 2022, the idea was that progress on democratisation – for instance, a deeper commitment to human rights and rule of law – would lead to a deeper partnership with the EU (EEAS, 2016). It was on this principle that the EU signed AAs and deep and comprehensive free trade area agreements with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine to accompany the visa liberalisation agreements. However, the three countries may not have made much progress on reforms at the time the AAs were signed, which again suggests some inconsistency in the EU's prior approach to conditionality.

The EU's revised enlargement methodology groups negotiating chapters into clusters and places rule of law and fundamental reforms at the core of the enlargement process (European Commission, 2020). It also attaches clearer conditionality and benchmarks to the process, with the aim of making it more predictable. Negotiations on "Cluster 1 – Fundamentals" open first and close last. This means that progress under that cluster determines the overall pace of negotiations for a candidate country (European Commission, 2022). This is promising, but it remains to be seen how effectively the EU will apply conditionality in the post 2022 enlargement process. The effectiveness will depend also on the credibility of the enlargement offer to partner countries, as without a genuine perspective for membership the EU has less leverage to apply conditionality.

The EU could also make better use of financial assistance as an incentive to accelerate democratic reforms or to reverse backsliding. The EU reduced its financial assistance for Moldova from €101m in 2014 (European Commission, 2014) to €90m in 2015 (European Commission, 2015) and in 2018 froze a €100m aid package for the country in response to elections that did not comply with democratic practices (Tanas, 2018). While this approach did not lead to immediate progress on democracy, it sent the right message to leaders in the region about the EU's 'red lines' in the framework of its cooperation with partners.

The EU has now begun to adopt a more 'stick-based' approach in Georgia in response to the passing of a controversial law that brands Western-backed media outlets and NGOs as "foreign agents" (Gavin, 2024). The EU has suspended Georgia's EU accession process and its support from the European Peace Facility, totalling €30m for 2024 (EU Delegation Georgia, 2024). According to one EU official,

part of Georgia's financial assistance within the current action plan will be redirected to civil society and NGOs.⁴

In the Western Balkans, the EU has previously applied measures that included the freezing of financial assistance for specific situations that are linked to actions that represent a security threat, such as the restrictive measures against Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2011 (Council of the EU, 2011) and in Kosovo in 2023 (Council of the EU, 2023). The 2024 reform and growth facility for the Western Balkans for the first time makes the region's access to funds dependent on progress on reforms (Council of the EU, 2024).

In the next round of enlargement, the EU should more systematically apply conditionality to the financial assistance it provides for candidate countries. This should include what it provides for Western Balkans candidate countries through the IPA; and for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine through the neighbourhood, development and international cooperation instrument (European Commission, n.d.-f). For example, the EU could introduce a simpler standardised process to freeze funds if democratic backsliding takes place in candidate countries.

As the war continues in Ukraine and security issues unfold once again in the Western Balkans, it is in the EU's interest to balance political and geopolitical considerations with the application of the conditionality principle. How the EU navigates this will be decisive for the credibility of the enlargement process as a whole and alter its potential to transform hybrid regimes into stable democratic states.

[Address the regional context and the absence of leadership](#)

The effectiveness of the EU's democracy promotion in the Western Balkans and eastern neighbourhood depends on political will and unity in both the EU and candidate countries, a secure and peaceful regional context, and a low level of hybridity in the states in question. In neither of the regions in question have these favourable conditions been present at the same time, and the likelihood that they will be in the next few years remains slim.

The period from 2014 to 2022 was marked by a lack of political will in the EU to pursue enlargement. But, without the prospect of enlargement, the EU lost its most

⁴ Authors' interview with EU official, Brussels, June 2024.

effective tool for promoting democracy in the Western Balkans. This lack of momentum indirectly contributed to the consolidation of hybrid regimes as the poor engagement prolonged the status quo. It also generated significant enlargement fatigue in the candidate countries among leaders and public.

In the eastern neighbourhood, EU democracy promotion policies had to compete against Russian tools of influence, including economic and political pressure, strategic corruption, and disinformation (Deen et al., 2021). This led the EU to adopt a cautious approach to the EaP, avoiding confrontation with Russia in order not to expose its partners to additional Russian pressure. The EU also waived its democracy promotion ambitions for countries of its eastern neighbourhood that were neither democracies nor willing to cooperate with the EU on this issue, for instance, Belarus and Azerbaijan (Kaca, 2021).

Before 2022, civil society in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine was the primary driving force for closer relations with the EU (Gromadzki et al., 2015). The EU's increased support for civil society, particularly since 2014, consolidated pro-EU sentiments and enhanced the capacity of civil society organisations to press their governments for reforms (Gerasymchuk et al., 2019). For instance, the election of Moldova's pro-EU president Maia Sandu was largely a result of citizens demanding more democracy and less corruption, as well as seeking greater alignment with the EU and the West. This kind of pressure was significant in enabling Moldova and Ukraine to achieve a sufficient level of readiness to begin the EU accession process in 2022. By offering the EU membership perspective to these countries, the EU has empowered itself as an actor in the region, with stronger leverage to help transform these countries into stable democracies. As discussed, however, the bloc's success will be subject to coherent application of conditionality.

The post-2022 reality in the eastern neighbourhood is favourable in terms of the political will for democratic reforms – both within the EU and in Moldova and Ukraine. But, despite their considerable progress over the past two years, Russia's war still hinders the governments of Moldova and Ukraine in their efforts to implement the reforms (Brzozowski, 2023). This is particularly the case for Ukraine, but Russia also periodically targets Moldova with hybrid actions. The EU will need to increase its technical and financial assistance to Moldova's and Ukraine's governments to increase their administrative capacities and continue with the implementation of democratic reforms.

Georgia, on the other hand, once a frontrunner in democratisation, has experienced a drastic reversal over the past three years. As one EU official noted, “Everything happened so fast that we were unprepared to deal with it.”⁵ Georgia’s situation exemplifies how quickly democratic progress can be lost, especially in countries where oligarchs and corrupt officials wield significant influence.

Enhance support for civil society and socialisation programmes

Democracy promotion in some countries in the Western Balkans and eastern neighbourhood is hindered by the vested interests of authoritarian regimes and oligarchic systems. Civil society organisations have criticised the EU’s approach of engaging with authoritarian and corrupt leaders in the Western Balkans (Zweers et al., 2022). In the eastern neighbourhood, the EU’s approach to cooperation with Belarus and Azerbaijan has also come under fire (Dempsey, 2021). And Georgian civil society is now increasing pressure on the EU to rethink its cooperation with the current government (Khodeli et al., 2024). In the past, the EU has redirected some of its support for civil societies in these regions in certain situations – for instance, following Moldova’s compromised local election in 2018 (European Commission, 2018a) and Belarus’s rigged election in 2020 (European Commission, 2021). The EU should build on this and adopt a more principled approach to authoritarian or corrupt leaders in these regions, leaning towards engagement with civil society organisations.

Perhaps even more importantly, extending participation in EU programmes such as Horizon 2020 and Erasmus + to Western Balkans states and Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine allows people, especially younger generations, to experience democracy with their own eyes. This helps build horizontal trust across national boundaries. Increased funding through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights and independent organisations such as the European Endowment for Democracy have allowed for rapid and flexible funding of pro-democracy projects in the two regions.

The EU’s re-engagement since 2022 will require it to go further in pursuit of enlargement, stability, and economic development. The bloc’s strategy cannot rely solely on cooperation with governments. Instead, the EU will need to make

⁵ Authors’ interviews with EU official, online, June 20, 2024.

substantial investments at the societal level, focusing on empowering civil society, fostering media freedom, and promoting grassroots democratic initiatives. These efforts are essential to apply pressure on governments and drive meaningful change.

Promote democracy at home

Over the past decade, the EU has experienced its own internal rule of law crisis that is far from over. This has significantly altered the bloc's politics and its policies.

When Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orban started an illiberal overhaul of the country's political system in 2012, EU institutions were unwilling to make use of treaty provisions that would have allowed them to intervene (Szente, 2024). With Hungary being a relatively small country, EU leaders did not view it as a major threat for the EU as a whole.

It was the breakdown of the rule of law-based system in Poland after 2015 that really sounded the alarm. But even then, the EU's reaction was slow and for several years remained ineffective. Neither the rule of law dialogue the European Commission initiated with Poland in January 2016 (European Commission, 2016) nor the Article 7 procedure (Deutsche Welle, 2017) that it opened with the country in December 2017 (with the involvement of other EU member states) produced any results. By April 2018, Poland had largely completed an overhaul of its judicial system that abolished the separation of powers. Only then did the EU's dispute with Poland over the rule of law produce a significant breakthrough: the Court of Justice of the European Union declared itself competent to deal with complaints about "systemic" violation of the rule of law in EU member states (CJEU, 2018). The same year, the European Commission decided to use the infringement procedure against Poland's judiciary reform (European Commission, 2018b). Although the EU institutions acted in line with EU treaties, the decisions had a truly revolutionary character that provide a new framework for protection of rule of law within the bloc.

The crises in Hungary and Poland, as well as the EU's experience in dealing with Bulgaria and Romania which joined the EU without fully complying with the 'fundamentals', sensitised EU institutions and national governments to the risks related to democratic backsliding. This included the damage they did to trust among leaders in the Western Balkans and the eastern neighbourhood regarding the legitimacy of the EU's enlargement mechanism.

For several EU member states, the confrontation with populist regimes in Poland and Hungary led to the conclusion that rule of law conditionality needs to be strengthened before new members can join the bloc and that its role as an instrument of the EU enlargement policy should be more straightforward (Group of Twelve, 2023). The revised enlargement methodology adopted in 2020 and the 2023 growth plan for the Western Balkans (European Commission, n.d.-g) reflect this assumption. The EU has placed more emphasis on strengthening reforms in candidate countries as well as on the rule of law conditionality of the EU funds they receive. These new provisions in the enlargement policy mirror solutions adopted within the bloc: payments from the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility (European Commission, n.d.-h) are strongly linked to reforms within member states. A new regulation that the European Commission adopted in 2021 (European Commission, n.d.-i) made it possible to withhold payments from the EU budget for countries in which rule of law standards do not provide sufficient protection against fraud.

The EU's crisis experience thus implies that "the more the systemic competition between democracies and authoritarian regimes extends into the EU, the better protected the fundamental principles of the EU must be" (Schwarzer, 2024).

Develop more specific evaluation criteria

The European Commission (in collaboration with the EU delegations) monitors and assesses whether countries have made advances on deep and sustainable democracy through its annual progress reports.

These progress reports are structured according to the chapters of the EU acquis for the accession countries, and more loosely around different priority areas for non-accession candidates. For both sets of countries, the European Commission conducts a review of the progress made on the areas identified in the overarching framework agreements, although the review is more in-depth for enlargement candidates. In doing so, the EU often uses data from various external organisations (such as the OSCE or Council of Europe). In addition to reports prepared by the European Commission, the European Court of Auditors also prepares occasional reports on the success of the EU's external democracy promotion efforts.

But the EU needs more uniform, clear-cut criteria to assess the level of progress made on democracy promotion. Up until now, the bloc mainly checks progress against action priorities identified in previous progress reports. But the EU does not

sufficiently measure the effects of the actions countries have taken. This makes it difficult to assess the degree to which EU policies have not only been implemented, but also achieved results.

Conclusion

EU enlargement's new chapter is playing out in a challenging environment, marked by systemic competition between democracies and authoritarian regimes. The EU's democracy promotion in the Western Balkans and the eastern neighbourhood will also continue to be challenged by internal developments in the bloc, the regional context, and external interferences.

In light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it has only become more urgent for the EU to defend democracy and the EU's core values both within the EU and in its immediate neighbourhood. The ultimate goal of the EU's approach should remain focused on helping its neighbours build resilient democracies, thereby reducing the ability of foreign malign actors, including Russia, to exploit vulnerabilities both within these regions and in the EU itself.

But so far, the EU's democracy promotion has been limited by the hybrid nature of the political systems in the regions in question. The EU's priorities in the support it provides to the countries in the two regions compounds this limitation. While the EU supports democracy at the societal level through various programmes and projects aimed at improving conditions for civil society and media, a bottom-up approach to democracy promotion that centres on trust building is not a priority in its engagement strategy. Instead, it privileges cooperation with political leaders and state institutions, and relies heavily on a 'carrot and stick' approach to bring about change.

The EU officials we spoke to for this paper tended to defend the EU's approach in the Western Balkans over the past two decades and reject the criticism that the EU has valued stability in the candidate countries over their democratisation.⁶ But before 2022, the EU's policies seem to have had a relatively modest effect on democratisation in those countries and in the eastern neighbourhood. The European Commission's progress reports – despite their flaws – reveal ups and downs but

⁶ Authors' interviews with EU officials, Brussels, June 2024.

overall confirm only unsatisfactory improvement in most countries. Of course, there are many factors at play that influence a country's democratic process – and the EU's policies and instruments certainly do not act alone to produce this lack of results.

But if the EU is to remain a community of democracies, it will need to make better use of its instruments and policies designed to promote and defend democratic principles. This means the EU's geopolitical goals and democracy promotion are deeply intertwined. It also implies that the bloc should attach more conditionality to the political and financial support it provides. Moreover, the EU should consider investing more in a bottom-up approach to strengthening democracy in the Western Balkans and eastern neighbourhood, with the aim of reducing the level of hybridity in some partner states.

Rule of law and democratic standards are essential for resilience against foreign influence. The EU should prioritise advancing these principles in its neighbouring regions and supporting them with technical and financial assistance. This could help foster transparent and accountable governance, thus enhancing stability and security for the entire European continent.

Methodology

We conducted both extensive desk research and interviews to construct an in-depth overview of the EU's efforts at democracy promotion in the six case study countries. The desk research engaged, firstly, with EU primary documents. These included communications, staff working documents, reports, and programming documents from the European Commission. We also examined council communications, reports from the European Court of Auditors, and the texts of agreements between the EU and the case study countries. These documents were used to establish the EU's priorities in the case countries, its financial allocations, and EU institutions' assessment of the bloc's efforts at democracy promotion. Where EU documents were unavailable, the desk research engaged with data from secondary literature in the form of academic and grey literature.

For the selection of the specific programmes or projects highlighted in this text, we adopted five criteria: a minimum duration of two years; a completion date within the last two years; an EU funding contribution of at least €500,000; implementation in

the capital city and a secondary city where possible, and alignment with one of the four components identified in the definition of democracy (that is: free and fair elections; rule of law; human rights; and civil society participation).

To supplement the desk research, we conducted 18 interviews. Of these, 12 involved former and current officials from the European Commission and the European External Action Service in Brussels. The 6 additional interviews were conducted with members of the EU delegations in the six selected case study countries.

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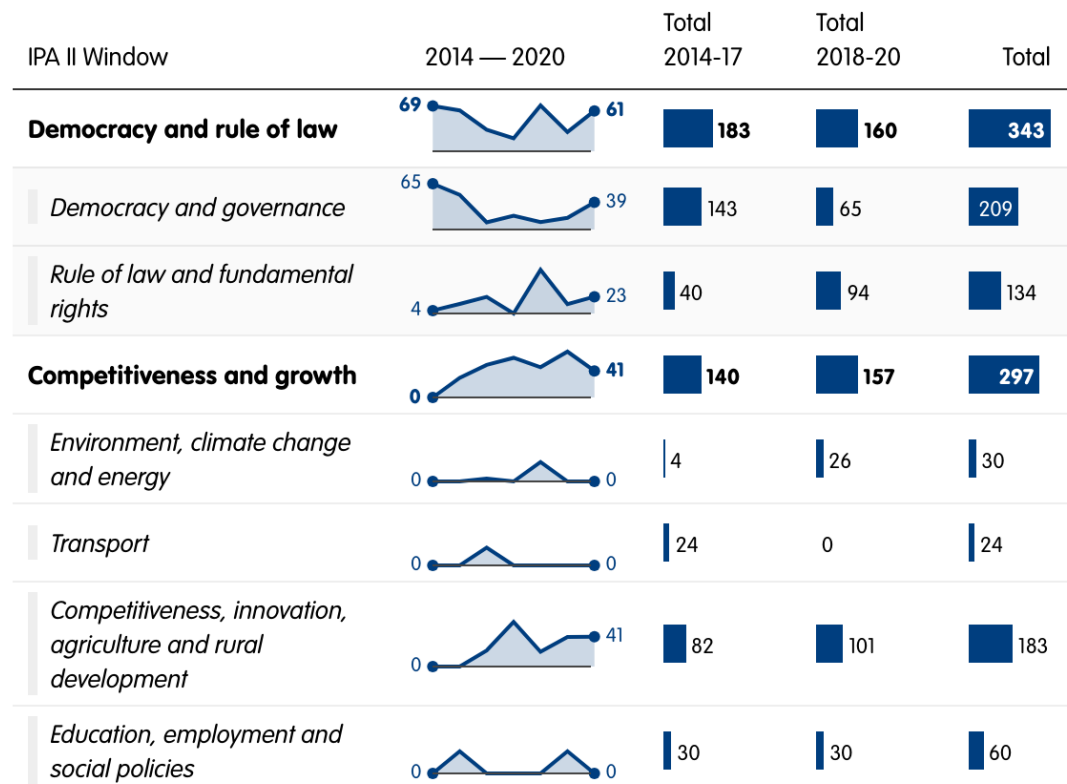
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Annexe I: Financial support

This annexe presents data on the main instruments the EU uses to provide financial support to countries in the Western Balkans (the instrument for pre-accession assistance – or IPA – in various iterations) and the eastern partnership (the European neighbourhood instrument – or ENI – and the neighbourhood, development and international cooperation instrument – or NDICI).

Regarding democracy promotion, the data illustrates two key points. Firstly, financial support typically allocated to democracy and rule of law priority areas is generally lower than that allocated to growth and environment-related priorities. Secondly, within the overall funds designated for democracy promotion, the largest share usually goes to priority areas related to good governance. However, recent years have seen an increasing focus on the rule of law, particularly evident in the increased funding allocation for Western Balkans countries, reflecting initiatives such as the revised enlargement methodology of 2020 which put rule of law at its centre.

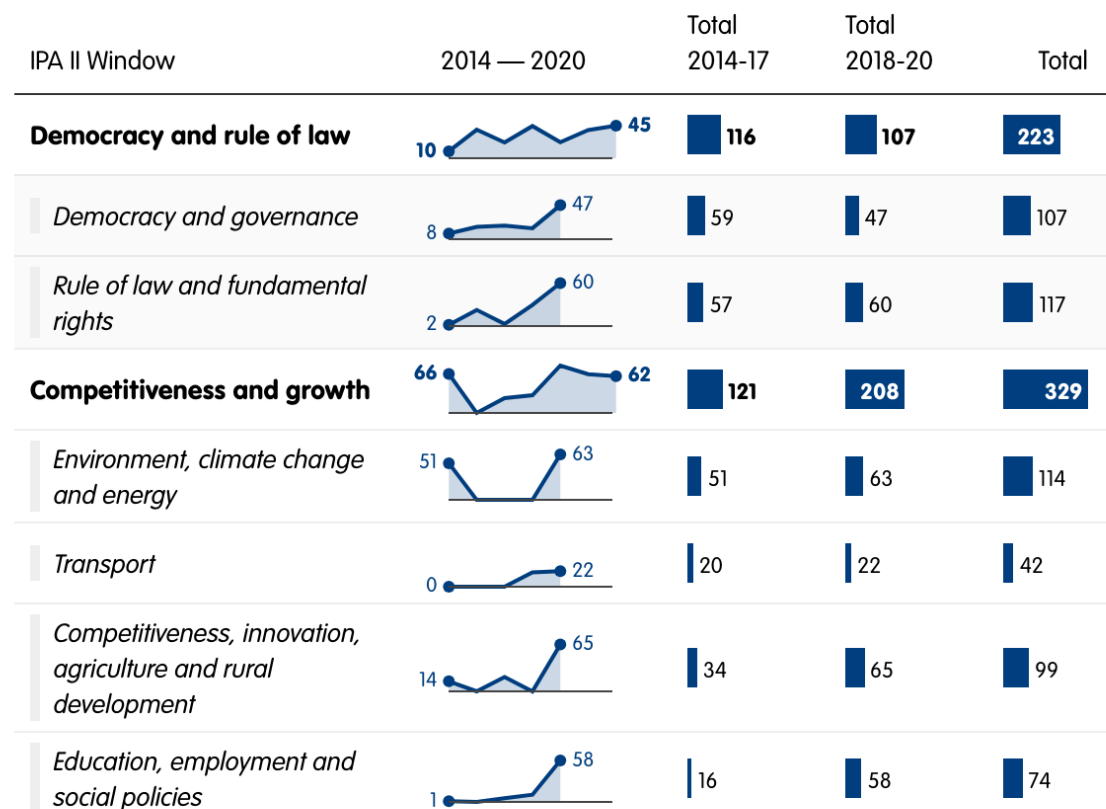
Albania: IPA II 2014-2020 indicative allocations. In million EUR



Source: European Commission
ECFR · ecfre.eu

Bosnia and Herzegovina: IPA II 2014-2020 indicative allocations.









In million EUR



The year granularity of the 2018-2020 data for subcategories is not available.

Source: European Commission
ECFR · ecfr.eu

Serbia: IPA II 2014-2020 indicative allocations. In million EUR

IPA II Window	2014 — 2020	Total 2014-17	Total 2018-20	Total
Democracy and rule of law	 80 — 78	439	253	693
<i>Democracy and governance</i>	 53 — 34	266	181	446
<i>Rule of law and fundamental rights</i>	 28 — 44	174	73	246
Competitiveness and growth	 99 — 159	378	469	847
<i>Environment, climate change and energy</i>	 75 — 0	153	169	322
<i>Transport</i>	 0 — 0	65	0	65
<i>Competitiveness, innovation, agriculture and rural development</i>	 5 — 105	114	223	337
<i>Education, employment and social policies</i>	 19 — 54	46	77	124
























Source: European Commission
ECFR · ecfr.eu

IPA III 2021-2027 indicative allocations. In million EUR

IPA III Windows	%	2021 — 2027	Total
Rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy	15%	281 — 317	2,089
Good governance, EU acquis alignment, good neighbourly relations and strategic communication	17%	308 — 347	2,291
Green agenda and sustainable connectivity	42%	788 — 888	5,860
Competitiveness and inclusive growth	22%	414 — 467	3,080
Territorial and cross-border cooperation	4%	65 — 73	485
Total Operational Budget	100%	1.9k — 2.1k	13,804
Administrative Appropriations	n/a	49 — 54	357
Total	100%	1.9k — 2.1k	14,162

Source: European Commission
ECFR · ecfr.eu

European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) indicative allocation.
2017-2020*, in million EUR.

Alias	Moldova	Georgia	Ukraine
Economic development and market opportunities	 122	 181	 106
Strengthening institutions and good governance	 52	 91	 133
Connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change	 87	 68	 80
Mobility and people-to-people contacts	 35	 45	 106
Complementary support for capacity development and institution building	 17	 23	 80
Complementary support for civil society development	 17	 23	 27
Complementary support for strategic communication	 17	 23	
Total	 348	 453	 530

*Ukraine: the indicative allocation is for the period 2018-2020. The maximum allocation of the range is displayed.

Source: European Commission
ECFR · ecfr.eu

Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation (NDICI) indicative allocation. 2021-2024, in million EUR

	Moldova	Georgia	Ukraine
Resilient, sustainable and integrated economy	78	119	224
Accountable institutions, the rule of law and security	39	51	128
Environmental and climate resilience	52	68	96
Resilient digital transformation	26	34	64
Resilient, gender-equal, fair and inclusive society	52	51	96
Support measures	13	17	32
Total	260	340	640

Source: European Commission
ECFR · ecfr.eu

DISCLAIMER

This data is based on desk research from information available on EU portals. It reflects certain limitations as to the availability and consistency of data related to support for democracy. Furthermore, there is a general lack of comparability between the data for the Western Balkans and eastern partnership countries due to the EU's varying methods of measurement and differing concepts for democracy used across both regions.

Annexe II: Project descriptions

Selected projects in Western Balkans countries

Region-wide

Name: Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye III

Years: 2023–2026

Funding: €41m (85 per cent from the EU; 15 per cent from the Council of Europe)

Partners: Council of Europe

Link: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/horizontal-facility/home>

Objectives: Support reforms in human rights, the rule of law, and democracy. Strengthen justice, combat corruption and economic crime, and promote anti-discrimination. Help the countries meet European standards and advance in the EU enlargement process.

Albania

Name: EU for Justice Reform

Years: 2019–2023

Funding: €34m

Partners: /

Link: <https://euprojects.al/euprojects/eu-for-justice-reform-2/>

Objectives: Strengthen the rule of law and law enforcement; reduce corruption in government agencies and the judiciary; and improve the independence, transparency, efficiency, and accountability of the Albanian justice system while aligning with European standards.

Name: EU for Justice Reform – Complementary Technical Assistance

Years: 2020–2023

Funding: €34m

Partners: /

Link: <https://euprojects.al/euprojects/eu-for-justice-reform-2/>

Objectives: Strengthen the rule of law and law enforcement; reduce corruption in government agencies and the judiciary; and improve the independence, transparency, efficiency, and accountability of the Albanian justice system while aligning with European standards.

Name: EU for Justice Reform – Complementary Technical Assistance

Years: 2020–2023

Funding: €8m

Partners: /

Link: <https://euprojects.al/euprojects/eu-for-justice-reform/>

Objectives: Strengthen the rule of law and law enforcement; reduce corruption in government agencies and the judiciary; and improve the independence, transparency, efficiency, and accountability of the Albanian justice system while aligning with European standards.

Name: Judiciary under the spotlight

Years: 2023–2026

Funding: €526,300

Partners: /

Link: <https://euprojects.al/euprojects/judiciary-under-spotlight/>

Objectives: Develop a judicial monitoring framework for civil society organisations (CSOs) to monitor and evaluate the Albanian judiciary’s functioning in compliance with legal, procedural, and best practices.

Name: National Resource Centre for Civil Society in Albania

Years: 2016 to 2022

Funding: €526,315

Partners: /

Link: <https://euprojects.al/euprojects/national-resource-centre-for-civil-society-in-albania/>

Objectives: Strengthen the capacities of CSOs to be effective, transparent, and accountable, and to create an environment conducive to civil society participation, participatory democracy, and EU integration in Albania.

Name: Youth Standing Up for Human Rights in Albania

Years: 2016–2022

Funding: €526,315

Partners: /

Link: <https://euprojects.al/euprojects/national-resource-centre-for-civil-society-in-albania/>

Objectives: Strengthen the capacities of CSOs to be effective, transparent, accountable, and to create an environment conducive to civil society participation, participatory democracy, and EU integration in Albania.

Name: Action against economic crime in Albania (Part of Horizontal Facility)

Years: 2023–2026

Funding: €895,000

Partners: Council of Europe

Link: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/tirana/action-against-economic-crime-in-albania>

Objectives: Strengthen legal and operational frameworks to align with GRECO recommendations, improve the effectiveness of law enforcement and the criminal justice system in combating economic crime, and enhance legislative and institutional capacities to oversee political finances and trace and confiscate criminal assets.

Name: Advancing protection from discrimination in Albania (Part of Horizontal Facility)

Years: 2023–2026

Funding: €850,000

Partners: Council of Europe

Link: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/tirana/advancing-the-protection-from-discrimination-in-albania1>

Objectives: Improve protection for minorities and vulnerable groups against discrimination and hate speech, enhance the capacities of public institutions and civil society organisations to combat discrimination, hate speech, and hate crime, and raise public awareness to foster a more inclusive society.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Name: EU4Justice – PHASES I and II

Years: 2019–2025

Funding: €6.7m

Partners: /

Link: <https://eu4justice.ba/en/about-project/>

Objectives: Align the justice system with European standards by enhancing the rule of law; improving the independence, quality, effectiveness, and accountability of the judiciary; and strengthening its efficiency in combating organised crime and corruption.

Name: EU4Electoral Process

Years: 2021-2022

Funding: €2m

Partners: /

Link: <https://eu4justice.ba/en/about-project/>

Objectives: Improve the integrity, transparency, and efficiency of Bosnia and Herzegovina's electoral process, align with international standards and recommendations, and support the Central Election Commission in implementing electoral reforms.

Name: EU4Civil Society - Support to existing and newly established Civil Society Organisations' networks

Years: 2022-ongoing

Funding: €1 million

Partners: /

Link: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/bosnia-and-herzegovina/eu-civil-society-eu4cscapacity-building-governments-include-csos-decision-making-bosnia-and_en

Objectives: Strengthen cooperation and dialogue between governments and civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, supporting inclusive social dialogue and social partners in legislation, collective negotiations, and reform implementation.

Name: EU Civil Society Facility and Media Programme for Bosnia and Herzegovina

Years: 2021-2023

Funding: €1 million

Partners: /

Link: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/75d78516-bae1-4df3-ae42-boff0035447b_en

Objectives: Strengthen participatory democracy and EU integration in Bosnia and Herzegovina by enhancing the role of civil society and media and promoting

networking among CSOs in areas such as the rule of law, anticorruption, and social inclusion.

Serbia

Name: EU for the Rule of Law

Years: 2022–2025

Funding: €20.8m

Partners: /

Link: <https://www.euzatebe.rs/en/projects/eu-for-the-judiciary-reform-in-serbia>

Objectives: Enhance the judiciary's independence and accountability, strengthen the administrative capacities of courts and public prosecutors' offices, and align Serbian judicial practices with European standards.

Name: EU for Fight Against Corruption and for Fundamental Rights (Part of EU for the Rule of Law)

Years: 2022–2025

Funding: €5m

Partners: /

Link: <https://www.euzatebe.rs/en/projects/eu-for-fight-against-corruption-and-for-fundamental-rights->

Objectives: Enhance preventive anticorruption measures and strengthen the protection of fundamental rights for Serbia to meet its Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) EU accession obligations.

Name: Technical Capacity Facility for the Implementation of Action Plans for Chapters 23 and 24 (Part of EU for the Rule of Law)

Years: 2022–2025

Funding: €5m

Partners: /

Link: <https://www.euzatebe.rs/en/projects/eu-for-technical-capacities-in-chapters-23-and-24>

Objectives: Enhance Serbia's technical capacities to meet EU obligations in Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom, and

Security); improve strategic, institutional, and human resources; and support the procurement and training necessary to implement the Action Plans.

Name: Pulse of Europe – Media trip to Europe

Years: 2020–2026

Funding: €900,000

Partners: /

Link: <https://www.euzatebe.rs/en/projects/pulse-of-europe--media-trips-to-eu>

Objectives: Raise awareness of Serbia's EU accession among citizens through media, support journalists in producing quality content about European integration, and foster debate and experience exchange on EU integration by organising media trips and public events.

Name: Development of System for Management of Cohesion Policy

Years: 2019–2022

Funding: €2,696,600

Partners: /

Link: <https://management-cohesion-policy.euzatebe.rs/en/about-project>

Objectives: Prepare Serbia's public administration for effective implementation of the EU cohesion policy by adopting the legal and institutional framework, prepare relevant plans and programmes, and capacity-building programmes.

Name: Strengthening human rights protection in Serbia (Part of Horizontal Facility)

Years: 2023–2026

Funding: €1m

Partners: Council of Europe

Link: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/belgrade/strengthening-human-rights-protection-in-serbia>

Objectives: Ensure the enjoyment of rights in line with European human rights standards, enhance legal professionals' capacities to handle human rights cases and execute European Court of Human Rights judgments, and facilitate judiciary-stakeholder dialogue for coherent domestic implementation of human rights standards.

Name: Promoting and protecting freedom of expression and media (Part of Horizontal Facility)

Years: 2023–2026

Funding: €720,000

Partners: Council of Europe

Link: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/belgrade/protecting-freedom-of-expression-and-of-the-media-in-serbia>

Objectives: Promote freedom of expression and improve the application of European standards; enhance the protection of journalists; and create a safer, more pluralistic media environment.

Name: Combating discrimination and promoting diversity in Serbia (Part of Horizontal Facility)

Years: 2023–2026

Funding: €800,000

Partners: Council of Europe

Link: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/belgrade/strengthening-human-rights-protection-in-serbia>

Objectives: Support legislative and policy reforms to combat discrimination and protect minority rights, strengthen capacities to counter hate speech and hate crime, and promote the rights of vulnerable groups, including youth, Roma, and LGBTI+ persons.

Selected projects in eastern European countries

Georgia

Name: Human Rights for All II

Years: 2020–2024

Funding: €2.3m

Partners: UN, implemented by UNDP and OHCHR

Link: <https://eu4.georgia.eu/projects/eu-project-page/?id=1481>

Objectives: Promote respect for human rights and strengthen protection mechanisms; improve the independent investigation of crimes committed by law enforcement officials; and combat torture and other forms of ill-treatment,

ensuring comprehensive legal protection for minority groups and vulnerable populations.

Name: Consolidating Parliamentary Democracy in Georgia

Years: 2019–2023

Funding: €1.5m

Partners: Implemented by UNDP

Link: <https://eu4georgia.eu/projects/eu-project-page/?id=715>

Objectives: Strengthen evidence-based policy and lawmaking processes in parliament, increase parliament's capacities for government oversight, and enhance public engagement in parliamentary processes through participatory democracy and open governance principles.

Name: Civil Society STAR Initiative

Years: 2019–2023

Funding: €1.5m

Partners: Implemented by UNDP

Link: <https://eu4georgia.eu/projects/eu-project-page/?id=1491>

Objectives: Improve the policy and financial framework for civil society, strengthen the links between CSOs and their constituencies, and enhance the organisational capacities and accountability of individual CSOs and networks across Georgia.

Name: Quality Media and Conscious Media Consumption for Resilient Society

Years: 2023–2025

Funding: €798,005

Partners: /

Link: <https://eu4georgia.eu/projects/eu-project-page/?id=1905>

Objectives: Contribute to media freedom, media and information literacy and public resilience to disinformation, and support local media to strengthen democracy in Georgia.

Moldova

Name: Inform, Empower, Act! Civil Society for good budgetary governance

Years: 2019-2023

Funding: €1.5 million

Partners: Implemented by UNDP

Link: <https://eu4georgia.eu/projects/eu-project-page/?id=715>

Objectives: Strengthen evidence-based policy and lawmaking processes in parliament, increase parliament's capacities for government oversight, and enhance public engagement in parliamentary processes through participatory democracy and open governance principles.

Name: Strengthening the Rule of Law and Anti-corruption Mechanisms in the Republic of Moldova

Years: 2020-2024

Funding: €7.8m

Partners: /

Link: <https://eu4moldova.eu/projects/eu-project-page/?id=1225>

Objectives: Raise awareness among citizens and civil society about the harm of corruption, strengthen anticorruption institutions and their coordination with civil society, and support the implementation of the national integrity and anticorruption strategy in high-risk sectors such as education, health, and agrifood.

Name: Enhance transparency, accountability of and access to the judiciary system

Years: 2021-2023

Funding: €1.03m

Partners: /

Link: <https://eu4moldova.eu/projects/eu-project-page/?id=1803>

Objectives: Identify and address impediments to access to justice and fair-trial rights, increase the capacity of lawyers and improve the legal aid system to ensure effective access to justice for all citizens, and support the design and implementation of judicial reforms.

Ukraine

Name: EU-UNDP Parliamentary Reform Project

Years: 2019-2022

Funding: €3m

Partners: UNDP

Link: <https://eu4ukraine.eu/en/projects-en/eu-project-page-en?id=707>

Objectives: Strengthen the legislative, oversight, and representative functions of the Ukrainian parliament; enhance professional capacities and human resource management within the parliamentary secretariat; and improve transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement through modernised communication strategies and digital tools.

Name: MediaFit programme for building information integrity in south & east Ukraine

Years: 2021 to 2023

Funding: €4m

Partners: Canal France International (CFI), Lithuanian Radio and Television (LRT)

Link: <https://eu4ukraine.eu/en/projects-en/eu-project-page-en?id=1585>

Objectives: Strengthen the editorial independence and digital capacities of target independent and public media, enhance fact-checking capacity, dismantle disinformation, and support producing relevant educational content for conflict-affected regions.

Name: Reinforcing the role of CSOs in the democratisation of Ukraine

Years: 2020-2023

Funding: €796,997

Partners: /

Link: <https://eu4ukraine.eu/en/projects-en/eu-project-page-en?id=721>

Objectives: Involve civil society actors in democratisation and war-related processes, enhance their capacity for community engagement, strengthen internal governance of regional CSOs, and improve policy dialogue by informing citizens about international assistance and countering propaganda.

Name: European Union and Council of Europe working together to strengthening the protection of human rights in Ukraine

Years: 2019–2022

Funding: €3m

Partners: /

Link: <https://eu4ukraine.eu/en/projects-en/eu-project-page-en?id=690>

Objectives: Support media freedom by ensuring public broadcasting independence and journalist safety, strengthen the ombudsperson's capacity to prevent human rights violations, advocate against discrimination, and promote human rights-compliant prison management.