

Working paper



EU enlargement policy and democratisation in the neighbourhood: The role of external actors



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:	fixed date: 1 January 2024
Project duration:	36 months
Call topic:	HORIZON-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01
Project website:	https://re-engaging.eu/
Document:	Working paper
Deliverable number:	
Deliverable title:	EU enlargement policy and democratisation in the neighbourhood: The role of external actors
Due date of deliverable:	26/06/2026
Actual submission date:	25/06/2026
Editors:	Kim Butson
Authors:	Engjellushe Morina
Reviewers:	Pernille Rieker, Morten Bøås
Participating beneficiaries:	D4.3
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:	2
Dissemination level:	PU - Public
Nature:	Working paper
Version:	1
Draft/Final:	Final
No of pages (including cover):	29
Keywords:	democracy promotion, resilience, EU enlargement, external actors



WORKING PAPER

EU enlargement policy and democratisation in the neighbourhood: The role of external actors

Engjellushe
Morina

25 June
2026

SUMMARY

The EU's enlargement policy, historically effective for democratic transformation, faces structural inadequacies in fostering democratic resilience in its neighbourhood, particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This paper argues that the policy is outdated and misfiring in hybrid regimes where informal networks overshadow institutional change.

This manifests in three main ways. First, the conditionality logic fails as hybrid regimes selectively comply without genuine reform, leading to a façade of democratic governance. Second, a deficit in social trust, notably low vertical trust in institutions, hinders the transition to democracy. Finally, external actors like America, China, Russia and Turkey exploit these weaknesses to further their interests, complicating matters for the EU.

The EU relies primarily on formal institutions for democracy promotion, which often strengthens informal power structures rather than dismantling them. To address these issues, the paper suggests the EU should promote the bottom-up participation of civil society. The bloc should also consider engagement frameworks that recognise the political and cultural dynamics in candidate countries, rather than relying solely on legalistic processes. The paper concludes by emphasising the urgency for the EU to adapt its enlargement strategy to promote genuine democratic resilience in today's geopolitical landscape.



Introduction

For decades, the EU's enlargement policy has been its most effective tool of democratic transformation. The promise of accession was a magnet that attracted candidate countries to institutional change, the rule of law and democratic governance. The enlargement policy remains vital. But as it is today conceived, the policy is structurally inadequate to secure the consolidation of democracy and resilience in the EU's neighbourhood.

The geopolitical environment in which this instrument of foreign policy functions has changed in a fundamental way. In February 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 provoked what the Re-Engage project calls "a historic revival of the EU enlargement process". Yet it also exposed the fundamental limitations of that process. Enlargement has acquired a new sense of urgency at just the point where its core assumptions are under the greatest stress.

This comparative policy paper sets out to answer two fundamental questions: is the EU's current enlargement policy adequate to foster democratic resilience and security in the EU's neighbourhood? And how can competing external powers, primarily Russia, China, Turkey and an increasingly unpredictable America, alter, undermine or condition its effectiveness?

The answers come in three main arguments:

First, while the EU's enlargement policy remains vital, it is structurally weak because it was built for a different geopolitical period and a different type of political difficulty. Its conditionality logic presupposes a reasonably linear trajectory from hybrid government towards democratic consolidation. This assumption, however, has been repeatedly contradicted by empirical evidence from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine.

Second, the main challenge to democratic resilience in the EU's neighbourhood is social trust, not institutional design. More specifically, it is the chronic disconnect between interpersonal trust, or horizontal trust (which remains high in all case countries); and institutional trust, or vertical trust (which remains critically low). Absent a way to bridge this gap, the EU's templates create compliance without transformation.

Third, external actors systematically take advantage of the openings left by the largely technocratic approach of the EU, and these openings are rather significant.

But such actors do not decide the trajectory of democratisation in the EU's neighbourhood.

The structural constraints of EU conditionality

The core problem diagnosed in most of the Re-Engage study is that the EU's main tool, conditionality, regularly misfires in hybrid regime contexts. This is a structural problem since conditionality was designed for states undergoing genuine democratic transition and not for what Bøås, Giske and Osland conceptualise as “enduring hybrid equilibria”; that is, political orders in which formal democratic institutions and informal patronal networks coexist, with the latter consistently dominating outcomes (Bøås, Giske and Osland, 2024).

One technique repeats in all the case studies the Re-Engage project has covered. Elites engage in “selective compliance” in adopting legal frameworks, establishing anti-corruption bodies, restructuring judiciaries and engaging in alignment with EU standards, while maintaining the informal power structures these reforms are nominally meant to dismantle (Buras, Dumoulin, Kelmendi and Marx, 2024). Buras et al. (2024) also make the point rather bluntly that the EU has relied too much on cooperation with governments and state institutions, employing a “carrot and stick” logic that empowers precisely the entrenched elites who are able to mimic reform without substantial change.

The problem is that EU conditionality and state capture become mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive, as the analysis of Richter and Wunsch's (2020) work demonstrates. The money goes through the same elite networks against which the reformers are supposed to fight. As Giske and Rieker (2026) point out, “a legalistic approach to enlargement therefore risks conflating institutional form with democratic substance.” Moreover, the authors note that this has become problematic in hybrid regimes where patronage and corruption are in harmony with formal rules and institutions, prompting laws to be adopted according to external benchmarks while power relations remain the same (Giske and Rieker, forthcoming 2026).

The Re-Engage case studies flesh out this abstract dynamic across the EU's neighbourhood. In Georgia, what looked to Brussels like genuine state-building under Mikheil Saakashvili (in office from 2004–2012) was in fact a thin procedural veneer over profoundly established patron-client institutions. When Georgian Dream took over from the United National Movement in 2012, it inherited and

intensified the same hybridised governance logic, culminating in the adoption of the Foreign Agents Law that effectively brought Georgia's EU accession track to an end. In their paper, Machavariani and Bolkvadze (2025) make the crucial observation that the EU is no longer dealing with a reluctant reformer oscillating between democratic and autocratic tendencies. Rather, it is faced with a government that actively opposes democratic orientation while using European-style institutional façades to deflect international criticism (Machavariani and Bolkvadze, 2025). This arrangement has no real purchase on conditionality.

In the Serbian case, Petrovic et al. (2025) outline how the Vučić government has mastered the art of geopolitical hedging: engaging in EU accession negotiations while simultaneously deepening energy and diplomatic ties with Russia and China. This is the “four pillars” foreign policy doctrine that makes Serbia “indispensable to all great powers at the same time” (Petrovic, Filipovic and Pantelic, 2025). Despite documented democratic backsliding, the EU has repeatedly opened new negotiation clusters with Serbia, establishing what Greubel et al. call “stabilitocracy”, a system in which the EU and other Western actors prioritise regime stability over democratisation, inadvertently normalising authoritarian tendencies (Greubel, Saris, Curin and Mazzoni, 2025).

A deeper systemic breakdown is revealed in the analysis of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Niksic, Silajdzic, Hirkic, Besirovic, Kapidzic, Turcalo and Kadic, 2025). The EU's project-based democracy promotion is delivered through civil society organisations citizens see as being captured by elites. Here, 51% of respondents said EU aid was being spent in the wrong way and 48% of them connected democratic development tied to the bloc with increased corruption. The institutional architecture of conditionality, progress reports, benchmarks and accession chapters has not broken the consociational power sharing structure institutionalised by the Dayton peace agreement. This is a structural impediment to any reform that threatens ethnic elites' access to resources.

Moldova is the most analytically intriguing contrast. The case study examines the democratic movement under the Sandu administration. But here again the authors find a persistent stabilitocracy effect (Sterpu, Teosa and Morari, 2025). That is, EU-supported reforms strengthen formal indicators but do not significantly affect informal power networks. Reform momentum is highly dependent on external financial lifelines that breed dependency rather than resilience.

The Albania case study is an example of “selective Europeanisation and conditional trust” (Hide and Xhaferaj, 2025). On paper, the country is the Western Balkans frontrunner in the accession process: it is a NATO member, enjoys full alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy and has undertaken extensive justice reform since 2016. But hybridity persists because the EU’s assistance remains absorbed in a domestic governance order, marked by neopatrimonial resource allocation and a tight symbiosis between media ownership, political elites and business interests. Citizens tend to trust “Europe” as a normative power, yet do not ascribe tangible improvements to EU-funded projects. For example, only 39% of respondents had heard about the EU4Justice project and only 12% about the PRO-FREX media freedom programme.

The Albanian example thus demonstrates the central paradox. The EU’s credibility is not primarily dependent on symbolic affiliation, which remains strong in all case nations, but on whether its aid results in citizen-facing institutional performance. Where it does not, symbolic trust in Europe coexists with lived experience of unreformed institutions; the gap between these two registers is precisely where alternative external narratives gain traction.

The current enlargement debate has thus become excessively legalistic, and that a predominantly legalistic understanding of enlargement risks overlooking the political and cultural dynamics that fundamentally shape democratic trajectories in candidate countries (Giske and Rieker, forthcoming 2026).

The hybrid regime problem

The basic problem for EU enlargement policy for the Western Balkans and neighbourhood policy for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is that the political systems it wants to influence are not failed or transitional democracies waiting to be completed. They are, as the theoretical framework of the Re-Engage project establishes, “durable hybrid governments”, or systems that “fuse formal democratic institutions with informal networks of patronage, rent-seeking and personal rule” in self-reinforcing rather than transitional ways (Bøås, Giske and Rieker, 2024).

The project has thus helped empirically disprove the 1990s “transitology” paradigm, which conceptualised regime hybridity as a transient step between authoritarianism and democracy. What the project work has observed across Albania, Bosnia, Serbia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine is not incomplete democratisation. It is rather a stable equilibrium in which formal democratic

institutions provide external legitimacy and access to international resources, while informal networks govern the actual distribution of power and resources.

This divide means a great deal for EU policy, because conditionality was designed on the assumption that candidate countries governments really want to reform and require external incentives to do so. Yet in hybrid regimes the dynamic is fundamentally different: political elites have enormous incentives to perform compliance without delivering it.

This phenomenon is well documented in the re-Engage case studies. In Georgia, the EU's democracy promotion efforts allowed for what the Georgia case study refers to as "selective compliance", where ruling elites "cherry-pick elements of conditionality in ways that preserve core informal practices rather than transform them" (Machavariani and Bolkvadze, 2025). The constitutional architecture in Bosnia, institutionalised by the Dayton peace agreement, has entrenched ethno-national divisions, which act as a structural veto on reform. The Bosnia case study describes this as a "hybrid political status quo", in which "power always remains partly behind the scenes within elite-driven personal networks that control resources and uphold regime stability" (Niksic et al, 2025). In Serbia, the Vučić administration's "four pillars doctrine" renders conditionality-based leverage structurally ineffective (Petrovic et al, 2025).

This is all part of producing the stabilitocracy effect: the EU and its institutions operate primarily through state institutions and prioritise stability over democratic reform. In this way EU engagement has often strengthened rather than dismantled the informal power structures it aimed to transform. The Georgia case study finds that in this situation, EU conditionality risks "bolstering rather than challenging hybrid authority".

The trust deficit

Another contribution of the Re-Engage project that goes beyond the standard EU conditionality literature is its systematic attention to the trust foundations of democratic resilience. The project's conceptual paper establishes an analytical distinction between vertical trust (citizens' confidence in governmental institutions and political leaders) and horizontal trust (interpersonal and inter-group solidarity). Both are necessary for democratic resilience. Their absence produces what the authors call a "porous social fabric" vulnerable to foreign interference (Bøås, Giske and Osland, 2024).

Trust remains incredibly low. And at the heart of this failure lies a problem that EU enlargement policy has been systematically slow to engage, the collapse of vertical trust. Citizens' lack of confidence in governmental institutions is persistent across the entire neighbourhood, with the empirical data generated by the Re-Engage project striking in their consistency.

Vertical trust is chronically low everywhere:

- In Georgia, only 18% of respondents trust the national government while 67% are “not at all satisfied” with the justice system.
- In Bosnia, the Weighted General Trust Index stands at 36.9%, with vertical trust (0.28) dramatically lower than horizontal trust (0.50). Respondents pointed out that if they were suddenly to lose their income, 82% would turn to relatives and kin while only 15% would turn to local government institutions.
- In Serbia, just 3% of the 18–29 age cohort trust any politician in government or in opposition. This finding has immediate implications for the EU's democracy promotion model, which relies on reformist parties and democratic institutions as vectors of change.
- In Moldova, trust in the national anti-corruption centre sits at roughly 34% overall, with socialist/communist identifiers (a significant constituency), trusting it at only 21%.
- In Albania, only 28% trust politicians and 32% trust bureaucrats, while international organisations (EU/OSCE) are trusted at 81%.
- In Ukraine, trust in relatives and kin remains very high at 89% and trust in the country's armed forces reaches 90%, while trust in the national government stands at 52%.¹

What makes these trust deficits analytically significant is that they are not passive background conditions but active governance resources. As the Re-Engage project's “Key Concepts” paper argues, where vertical trust is low, rulers substitute legitimacy for patronage, and hybrid regimes perpetuate themselves precisely by managing this deficit through clientelist distribution rather than resolving it through institutional performance (Bøås, Giske and Osland, 2024). The project's “Theory and Methods” paper frames this through the “theatre state” versus

¹ Quota sampling in Kyiv (N = 572 respondents): Male and female; Age (in the spans **18-29**, **30-54**, **55+**); Education level. Face-to-face street interviews, first since the Russian full-scale invasion in randomised, designated locations in Kyiv.

“shadow state” distinction: formal institutions perform legality and accountability for external audiences (including EU assessors), while the shadow state manages actual resource distribution through concealed patronal channels (Bøås, Giske and Rieker, 2024).

This has direct implications for EU democracy promotion. EU programmes that operate primarily through formal institutional channels, such as judicial reform bodies, civil society organisations and media regulatory authorities, risk being absorbed into the theatre state without penetrating the shadow state. Buras et al. (2024) recommend the EU invest more in “bottom-up approaches” to respond to exactly this diagnosis, though the subsequent case studies suggest this is easier said than done: the EU’s administrative requirements, reporting burdens and preference for established institutional partners systematically disadvantage grassroots actors relative to professional NGOs and government intermediaries.

The diaspora dimension deserves particular emphasis. In Albania, Bosnia and Moldova, horizontal trust is partly sustained through transnational family networks, for instance, relatives abroad who function as alternative welfare providers and as living embodiments of EU-standard governance. Remittances constitute a parallel social safety net where state provision is unreliable. This creates a form of embodied pro-European sentiment at the societal level that is quite distinct from elite-mediated Europeanisation, and it suggests that the EU’s mobility and educational programmes (Erasmus+, visa liberalisation and so on) may generate more durable democratic socialisation than its formal institutional reform programmes.

The Serbia protest movement documented in “Trust, Social Cohesion and EU Democracy Promotion in Times of Acute Political Crisis – The case of Serbia”, represents the most dramatic manifestation of the trust crisis. This leaderless student movement emerged after the 2024 Novi Sad railway disaster and has sustained mass mobilisation for over a year. It is simultaneously the strongest expression of horizontal democratic solidarity the Re-Engage project has covered and the starkest illustration of the EU’s limited capacity to capitalise on civil society energy. The movement explicitly distances itself from all political parties, all NGOs and increasingly from EU institutions, which are perceived as complicit in legitimising the Vučić regime through diplomatic caution. The European Commission’s progress report in November 2025 belatedly acknowledged

backsliding, but EU flags have progressively disappeared from protest sites in a symbolically powerful indicator of the credibility cost of strategic ambiguity.²

The theoretical significance of this divergence between vertical and horizontal trust, as Bøås, Giske and Rieker (2024) establish in the Re-Engage framework, is that it stabilises hybrid governance rather than destabilising it. When citizens cannot trust institutions to deliver justice, welfare or accountability, they retreat into informal networks such as families, neighbours, local community ties, religious communities and diaspora connections. These networks provide everyday resilience without generating the collective demands for institutional reform that democratic accountability requires. The result is a perverse equilibrium: horizontal trust keeps societies socially cohesive enough to avoid breakdown, while the collapse of vertical trust prevents the civic mobilisation that would challenge hybrid power structures. In this sense, hybrid regimes persist, not because they are strong but because the social foundations of democratic challenge are weak.

The implications for EU policy are profound. Institutional templates and procedural reforms cannot generate vertical trust if citizens do not experience those reforms as changes in their daily interactions with the state. The Georgia case study captures this dynamic perfectly. Survey data show that 81% of Georgians consider the EU important for democracy, yet only 36% believe EU support is strategically well-placed, and 45% consider it misallocated (Machavariani and Bolkvadze, 2025). They value the EU as a normative power but distrust it as a concrete implementer. This is a paradox of trust the Moldova case study similarly identifies, noting that citizens “may aspire to EU integration while simultaneously distrusting NGOs that promote democratic reforms, perceiving them as distant, elite-driven or externally oriented” (Sterpu et al, 2025).

The elite capture problem

This paradox is structurally rooted in the way the EU has operationalised democracy promotion. Across all the case countries, EU-funded initiatives have been channelled primarily through urban, professionalised NGOs that have limited societal legitimacy beyond educated, metropolitan constituencies. In Bosnia, focus group participants noted that established organisations with long track records of EU project implementation were consistently favoured over smaller or grassroots initiatives. These dynamic risks producing “rent politics”, whereby certain

² [Serbia Report 2025 - Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood](#)

organisations “become intermediaries for donor funds rather than authentic agents of social change” (Niksic et al., 2025). In Serbia, 69% of citizens answered “no” when asked whether EU support is well-placed, a finding that encompasses critics of the regime who nonetheless view the EU as passively enabling Aleksandar Vučić’s hybrid governance (Petrovic et al, 2025). In Georgia, 75% of respondents could not name a single EU-funded democracy initiative, while only 15% of rural respondents reported any awareness of EU-funded projects at all (Machavariani and Bolkvadze, 2025).

The structural consequence is an EU democracy promotion ecosystem that is simultaneously over-visible to urban educated elites who already share its normative frameworks and nearly invisible to the broader populations whose trust is most critical for democratic resilience. This configuration directly reinforces the elite capture dynamic it aims to counter. EU-supported reforms are implemented by actors whose societal legitimacy is contested, producing formal institutional change without the social internalisation that would make those changes durable.

The pace-credibility tension

A further structural limitation concerns timing. The 2026 enlargement agenda requires Montenegro to close nearly two-thirds of its acquis within ten months, while Ukraine has requested membership by 2027. This geopolitical acceleration creates a fundamental tension between the merit-based conditionality underpinning EU enlargement’s credibility and the strategic urgency the security environment demands. As Berta López Domènech observes: “Whether 2026 becomes the ‘better year’ Marta Kos, EU Enlargement Commissioner, envisages will depend on candidates delivering reforms, the Commission kicking off serious discussion on internal reform, and the EU Council moving decisively on the final stages of accession,” all simultaneously, in a turbulent geopolitical context in which “the EU struggles to have a voice” (Greubel et al., 2026).

The risk of acceleration is that standards are diluted and that the enlargement process loses the very credibility that makes it effective as a reform incentive. Candidate country publics that have been told accession depends on substantive democratic progress will draw their own conclusions from fast-tracked processes that appear to reward geopolitical positioning over genuine, deep-rooted reform. This dynamic is already visible in how Serbian protesters interpret EU engagement.

The role of external actors

The Re-Engage comparative analysis of America, China, Russia and Turkey provides a systematic framework to understand how external actors interact with hybrid regimes in ways that either complement or counter EU democracy promotion. The key analytical insight is that each actor has a distinctive mode of engagement with hybridity that the EU must understand rather than ignore (Daniel, Laryš, Švec, Ayan Musil and Ditrych, 2024).

Russia: Exploiting structural vulnerabilities

Russia operates as an ideological and geopolitical spoiler. Its primary tools include disinformation, energy blackmail, support for far-right and nationalist movements and orchestration of breakaway territories. These seem specifically calibrated to exploit the trust deficits, societal polarisation and institutional weaknesses that hybrid regimes produce.

Russia does not primarily seek to integrate the neighbourhood into its own institutional structures (such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union that have limited appeal anyhow). Rather, it seeks to prevent EU and NATO integration while sustaining a “controlled instability” that keeps target states dependent. Its control of energy supplies in Bosnia and Serbia, its manipulation of Transnistria region as leverage over Moldova, and its extensive disinformation operations across all six case countries constitute what Daniel et al. (2024) call “low-cost, high-impact destabilisation”. In other words, Russia uses asymmetric tools that impose disproportionate costs on societies with weak institutional defences.

The scenario paper “Pathways to the East, Pathways to the West: Four Scenarios of Eastern Europe in 2035” models how Russia’s relative capacity shapes eastern neighbourhood trajectories. In the “Wavering” scenario, which many observers consider the current trajectory for Ukraine and Moldova, Russia has been sufficiently weakened by its war to reduce overt coercive pressure, but domestic political divisions and reform fatigue prevent the “Going West” scenario of consolidation. The paper identifies the EU’s sustained engagement as a necessary but insufficient condition for democratic consolidation, arguing that the bloc must calibrate its engagement to local societal dynamics rather than assume a weakened Russia automatically clears the path to “go West” (Halás and Daniel, 2025).

Russia's engagement in the EU's neighbourhood operates through a fundamentally different logic from the bloc's. Where the EU seeks to transform governance structures through procedural alignment and institutional incentives, Russia seeks to exploit existing structural vulnerabilities such as frozen conflicts, ethnic divisions, energy dependencies and the trust deficits that democratic backsliding generates to maintain strategic influence and prevent the consolidation of EU-aligned governance.

In the Western Balkan countries, Russia's main instruments are informational. Moscow "continues to utilize some of the still-existing energy dependencies, networks of conservative, nationalist, and other ideologically aligned actors, as well as disinformation as key tools of influence" (Metodieva and Daniel, 2025). In Bosnia, Russian support for Milorad Dodik's secessionist politics in Republika Srpska represents an attempt to weaponise the Dayton constitutional architecture against EU enlargement, using legal veto mechanisms to prevent the institutional reforms accession requires. In Serbia, Russia benefits from a reservoir of cultural and historical affinity cultivated through decades of Orthodox Christian solidarity messaging and anti-Western narratives, even as Serbian citizens simultaneously recognise the EU's economic importance.

In the eastern neighbourhood, Russian engagement is more directly coercive. Georgia's authoritarian drift under Georgian Dream is a case study in how Russian hybrid interference can align with domestic elite interests to produce democratic backsliding within a formal candidate country. The Foreign Agents Law, modelled explicitly on Russian legislation, effectively weaponises EU conditionality's reliance on civil society intermediaries by restricting the operational space of the very organisations through which the bloc's democracy promotion operates.

In Moldova, Russia maintains leverage through the unresolved Transnistria conflict, energy dependency relationships, and sustained information operations targeting Russian-speaking communities in Gagauzia and the north of the country. The scenario analysis identifies Russian interference as a primary driver of the "Going East" trajectory in which authoritarian consolidation and Western disengagement mutually reinforce each other (Halás and Daniel, 2025).

Critically, Russia's effectiveness does not depend on offering a superior governance model or providing material benefits. The Re-Engage vignette data show that Russian assistance is assessed negatively by majorities in Bosnia, Georgia and Moldova. Instead, Russia offers something more insidious: permission for hybrid

governance and the assurance that authoritarian elites will not face the conditionality and accountability demands that EU membership entails. As the Western Balkans scenario analysis observes, Moscow “paints the EU as impotent and presents itself as a guarantor of ‘Slavic Brotherhood’” and “Orthodox World”; a narrative that does not need to be affirmatively attractive as long as it delegitimises EU alternatives (Metodieva and Daniel, 2025).

China: Economic penetration without conditionality

China operates through a fundamentally different logic from Russia: one of economic penetration without democratic conditionality. Daniel et al.’s (2024) analysis of Chinese engagement in the Western Balkans documents a systematic pattern of infrastructure contracts awarded with no transparency or competitive tendering; mining and energy investments that include documented environmental and labour rights violations; digital surveillance infrastructure (the Belgrade “Safe City” Huawei project); and clientelist ties to political elites who benefit personally from Chinese investment flows.

The key mechanism is that Chinese investment requires only that recipient elites maintain cooperative foreign policies and open strategic sectors; it does not require rule of law reforms, media freedom or judicial independence. In hybrid regimes where elites have strong incentives to resist precisely these reforms, Chinese capital represents an alternative patronage source that reduces their dependence on EU conditionality (Daniel et al, 2024).

In the “Fractured, Integrated, at War? Five Scenarios for the Geopolitical Futures of Western Balkans in 2035” background paper, the “Grey Zone” scenario captures a real risk of pragmatic EU-China accommodation producing partial integration without rule-of-law transformation. As the paper notes, if Chinese infrastructure access can be framed as complementary to EU integration rather than contradictory to it, local elites have every incentive to present it that way. This reduces the EU’s leverage without openly defying its enlargement framework. Furthermore, the Western Balkans scenarios describe China’s model as providing “no-questions-asked” financing that “directly competes with the EU” and enables “Balkan leaders to bypass democratic conditions tied to EU accession” (Metodieva and Daniel, 2025).

In the Western Balkans, Chinese investment is concentrated in Montenegro and Serbia. There, it has achieved “a certain level of control over key strategic and digital infrastructure and resource sectors”, despite generating public backlash over project quality and environmental impact. The political economy of Chinese

engagement is one of elite capture at scale: large infrastructure projects funded through state-owned enterprises generate financial relationships between Chinese institutions and local political elites. These, in turn, create incentives for those elites to resist EU conditionality on rule of law and procurement transparency.

In the eastern neighbourhood, Chinese engagement is less developed but strategically significant. The scenario analysis identifies Chinese influence on telecommunications and energy infrastructure as a long-term concern, with Beijing using investment to “build leverage over sectors which can be used as direct or indirect political influence” (Halás and Daniel, 2025). The reconstruction of Ukraine, if peace negotiations produce a settlement, represents a major arena of potential Chinese economic penetration in which the EU’s capacity to shape terms through conditionality will be tested.

Citizens’ attitudes toward China, as revealed by the vignette data, are characterised by ambivalence rather than enthusiasm. Respondents tended to evaluate China pragmatically, seeing it mainly as a potential source of material benefit rather than through normative frameworks. In Georgia, 35% of respondents assess Chinese assistance positively while 46% are uncertain or negative. In Moldova, Chinese support is garnered primarily from economically vulnerable respondents and socialist/communist identifiers (Machavariani and Bolkvadze, 2025; Sterpu, Teosa and Morari, 2025). This pragmatic receptiveness creates an opening for Chinese influence that the EU has been slow to counter.

Turkey: The pragmatic regional actor

Turkey occupies a distinctive position in the European neighbourhood as a pragmatic, transactional actor that “leverages historical, religious, and ethnic ties opportunistically” without an ideological commitment to either democratic promotion or authoritarian entrenchment. In the Western Balkans, Turkey’s engagement in Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo and among Muslim-majority populations more broadly represents a form of cultural diplomacy. Through this, Ankara competes with EU normative influence without directly opposing EU integration objectives. Turkey positions itself as a mediator and development partner, offering “partnerships without demanding reforms” in ways that sustain hybrid regimes by providing an alternative source of external validation (Metodieva and Daniel, 2025).

The scenario analyses identify Turkey’s trajectory as a critical uncertainty for EU neighbourhood policy. A Turkey under continued Erdoğanist leadership maintains pragmatic multi-alignment that undermines EU conditionality while avoiding

direct confrontation. A democratised Turkey, modelled on the political platforms of opposition figures like the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, could become “a constructive regional force” that reinforces EU integration trajectories (Metodieva and Daniel, wildcard scenario, 2025). This occurrence underscores that Turkey is neither a permanent obstacle nor a reliable partner, but a variable whose direction depends substantially on its own domestic democratic trajectory.

In all case countries, the vignette data showed a positive evaluation of Turkey but one without strong enthusiasm. The country seems to occupy a “pragmatic, middle-ground position” that reflects its role as a “functional regional partner shaped by proximity, trade and cross-border mobility” rather than a normative alternative to the EU (Machavariani and Bolkvadze, 2025). Turkey’s influence is most consequential in what it signals: that hybrid governance is compatible with regional integration, that conditionality is negotiable and that audiences exist for anti-EU narratives among populations frustrated with the EU’s combination of high demands and slow delivery.

Turkey presents the most analytically complex case because it is simultaneously a NATO member, an EU candidate country (however stalled) and an active geopolitical competitor in both regions. Daniel et al. (2024) characterise Turkey’s engagement as pragmatic neo-Ottomanism; it targets “kin communities” (Muslim-majority populations in the Western Balkans, Gagauzia Turks in Moldova, Crimean Tatars in Ukraine), through TIKA development aid, Diyanet religious infrastructure, drone sales and high-level diplomacy. Turkey has shown a capacity for constructive regional engagement that the EU currently lacks, for instance, in its mediation between Bosnia and Serbia, its NATO Kosovo Force leadership and its role as the primary arms supplier to both Kosovo and Ukraine. But in parallel, it has maintained gas relations with Russia, refused to join Western sanctions and instrumentalised Islamic identity for geopolitical purposes. Its engagement with hybrid regimes is thus ultimately about influence maximisation and not democratic consolidation.

The paper notes that Turkey offers local elites what the EU cannot: unconditional recognition, visible economic benefits and no demands for accountability. In this sense, Turkey competes with EU conditionality by offering an alternative patron whose demands are more compatible with hybrid regime survival and not a different governance model (Daniel et al, 2024).

America: The indispensable variable

Perhaps the most consequential external actor for the EU's neighbourhood strategy is not even a competitor. Rather, it is a partner whose reliability has become structurally uncertain. The Re-Engage scenario analyses identify US engagement as a *sine qua non* condition for the sustainability of a pro-Western orientation in eastern Europe. In the "Going West" scenario, the most optimistic trajectory "assumed a certain level of the US reengagement with the region" (Halás and Daniel, 2025). Conversely, the "Post-American Era" scenario in the Western Balkans analysis identifies US withdrawal as the driver of a fragmented regional landscape in which both China and Russia expand their influence while EU enlargement slows and regional conflicts destabilise (Metodieva and Daniel, 2025).

The Trump administration's "America First" foreign policy has introduced structural uncertainty into these calculations that goes beyond any single policy decision. When the US reduces its commitment to NATO, questions EU trade arrangements and signals indifference to democratic backsliding in candidate countries, it simultaneously weakens the security architecture that gives EU membership its strategic value and validates the hybrid regime narrative that the EU and its allies are unreliable partners. The Serbia case study notes that Serbian protesters, who might be expected to seek EU support, are conspicuously silent about geopolitical preferences. This is in part because they perceive "all four major geopolitical players as, in different ways and to a different extent, enabling Vučić's authoritarianism" (Petrovic, Filipovic and Pantelic, 2025)

This suggests that the EU's neighbourhood strategy cannot be evaluated in isolation from transatlantic coherence and security. The scenario analyses consistently identify EU-US coordination as a multiplier of EU effectiveness, and US disengagement as a multiplier of competitor influence from external actors. For EU preparedness, this means the neighbourhood strategy requires not only internal reform of enlargement tools but also sustained investment in the transatlantic relationship as a structural precondition for European resilience and security.

America has historically functioned as a broadly supportive and complementary actor to the EU in the neighbourhood. But its engagement has been characterised by strategic inconsistency and episodic prioritisation, especially in the last decade. Daniel et al. (2024) trace a pattern of reactive involvement driven by crisis and not sustained democratic support. This includes the 1990s Balkans interventions, the colour revolution period and the 2022 Ukraine mobilisation. Concern about the Trump administration's return to transactional foreign policy, evident in the

Washington Agreement with Serbia and Kosovo, which tied normalisation to Israeli and Chinese tech policy rather than democratic reforms, illustrates how US unilateralism can actively undermine EU coherence.³ Under the second Trump administration, Daniel et al. (2025) raise the prospect of the US becoming an active source of instability, endorsing Orbán-style governance models that contradict EU democratic standards.

Democratic resilience: What the evidence shows

Civil society as both an asset and a limitation

Across all case countries, civil society emerges as the primary agent of democratic resilience under conditions of hybrid governance and external pressure. But it also emerges simultaneously as one of the most structurally constrained actors in the democracy promotion ecosystem. In Georgia, civil society organisations have functioned as “the primary agency of democratic resistance” against the Georgian Dream government’s authoritarian consolidation, sustaining pro-European orientation even as formal institutional channels close (Machavariani and Bolkvadze, 2025). In Serbia, the student movement represents a remarkable demonstration of civic resilience, an “unexpected mass mobilization against authoritarian tendencies” that has sustained itself for over a year without formal organisational structure, leadership or ideological alignment (Petrovic, Filipovic and Pantelic, 2025).

Yet, the Serbian student movement’s resilience also reveals the structural limits of civil society as a vehicle for democratic transformation. The movement’s “leaderless” character reflects the extent of the vertical trust collapse in Serbia, as do its deliberate distance from political parties, established NGOs and the conventional channels of democratic representation. Students have distanced themselves from the government and indeed the entire political system, creating a movement that can sustain protest but that struggles to translate civic energy into institutional change. As the Serbia case study notes, “the lack of vertical trust among the general public has escalated to a point where a significant number of Serbian citizens doubt that the current crisis could be solved in a representative democracy by means aligned with the principles of representative democracy.” This is democratic resilience operating at the limits of its capacity.

³ [DCPD-202000651.pdf](#)

However, the structural solution to this problem could be to embed civil society in EU policy ecosystems earlier and more systematically, with “formal channels ensuring that CSO evidence feeds directly into monitoring, implementation and corrective mechanisms” (Greubel et al., 2026). This structural reform requires political will from EU institutions that have historically preferred engagement with established, professionalised CSOs over the messier, less predictable world of grassroots civic mobilisation.

Media environment

The media environment is a dimension of EU neighbourhood preparedness that receives insufficient attention in the enlargement framework. Across all case countries, the Re-Engage data show trust in traditional and digital media is critically low, with competing narratives from pro-government, pro-Russian and pro-EU sources fragmenting the common public sphere that democratic deliberation requires. In Georgia, under 20% of respondents trust leading television channels. Facebook, trusted by only 23%, simultaneously functions as the dominant news source and a primary vehicle for disinformation. In Serbia, the regime has actively constructed what the case study calls a “loyalist civil society” including academic institutions, NGOs, human rights activists and media organisations that present as independent but operate within the regime’s normative framework, and which are then able to compete for EU democracy promotion funding.

The disinformation challenge is central to EU enlargement policy. Democratic resilience requires not only functioning institutions but a functioning public sphere in which citizens can form accurate political judgments. When that public sphere is systematically corrupted by state-aligned media, Russian information operations and the algorithmic amplification of polarising content, the institutional reforms EU conditionality demands lose their social foundations.

ECFR’s policy brief “From shield to sword: Europe’s offensive strategy for the hybrid age”, emphasises the importance of information-related security initiatives such as European Democracy Shield and deems them promising first steps.⁴ But the authors argue that these initiatives are few and far in between and usually reflect EU’s defensive and reactive response to disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, power cuts, drone incursions and so on. Instead, Brown et al. suggest: “Europe

⁴ [European Democracy Shield and EU Strategy for Civil Society pave the way for stronger and more resilient democracies - Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood](#)

should be ready to go on the offensive in the informational, cyber, financial and kinetic domains to defend its democratic societies against a growing number of hostile actors and authoritarian states, especially Russia” (Brown, Kobzova, Popescu and Torreblanca, 2026).

Geopolitical imaginaries and multi-alignment

One of the most significant empirical findings across the Re-Engage case countries is that citizens do not navigate the geopolitical landscape through binary choices between Europe and Russia. Instead, the research documents broad “pragmatic multi-alignment”. This is a pattern of evaluation in which external actors are assessed not through ideological frameworks but through the lens of material vulnerability, information exposure and trust trajectories. Citizens in all case countries maintain a “repertoire of multiple geopolitical imaginaries, treating external actors as potential sources of complementary benefits rather than mutually exclusive options”.

This finding has dual implications for EU neighbourhood policy. On one hand, it means the EU’s dominance as a normative reference point is more robust than the “pro-Russian” versus “pro-European” framing in public debate suggests. Even in Serbia, where Russian cultural affinity is strongest, the vignette data show that EU economic assistance is assessed positively by substantial majorities. On the other hand, multi-alignment means EU conditionality is operating in a competitive environment where alternative actors can always offer something like validation, investment or cultural recognition that the EU’s procedural demands do not provide. The EU’s credibility premium is real but conditional; it rests on the expectation of delivery, and that premium erodes where delivery is slow, selective or elite-captured.

What would a sufficient strategy require?

Amid war and intensifying geopolitical competition, EU policymakers have shown renewed focus on enlargement as an important instrument for building a resilient neighbourhood capable of countering external threats. Still the Re-Engage papers show that the bloc’s existing toolkit and policy approach is not adequate to this ambition. The EU needs to revise approaches that promote EU democracy, such as linkage, leverage and governance (Giesel and Rieker, 2026), perhaps even replacing or at least substantially supplementing them with what the authors call the “embedded democracy model”. Arguably, today’s enlargement debate has become

excessively legalistic, and a predominantly legalistic understanding of enlargement risks overlooking the political and cultural dynamics that fundamentally shape democratic trajectories in candidate countries.

The linkage model, rooted in modernisation theory, assumed that economic development and transnational ties would generate domestic demand for democracy. The leverage model, centred on conditionality and the Copenhagen Criteria, used the prospect of membership as an incentive for reform. The governance model, which emerged after the 2013 Croatian accession, shifted focus to sectoral norm transfer and administrative approximation. Giske and Rieker (2026) place these models on a two-dimensional grid of formal/informal institutions and top-down/bottom-up approaches. The authors find that each of them is, for different reasons, insufficient when it comes to ensuring democratic consolidation in the current geopolitical context, especially because they neglect both informal institutions and the role of societal trust.

Furthermore, the leverage model often equated formal compliance with democratic progress, despite evidence that elites can strategically adapt to EU demands while preserving clientelist or captured systems beneath the surface. The governance model, meanwhile, sought to promote good governance through sectoral rule transfer, but its practical effects were frequently limited to legislative adoption rather than effective implementation, producing forms of decoupling between “law on the books” and “law in action”. The combined effect has produced what is described above, the stabilitocracy trap: EU assistance instead helps cement the rule of less-than-democratic regimes, lending them international legitimacy without democratising them in substance.

So, the EU must not discard, and the EU should not abandon demand for rule of law application. But it should stop treating legal conditionality as a sufficient mechanism of change. A revised strategy would rest on keeping the legal core of enlargement intact while:

- taking trust-building seriously as an enlargement objective in its own right;
- differentiating more carefully across country contexts; and
- acknowledging that enlargement now unfolds under geopolitical contestation, in which rival actors matter not only because they provide alternative material resources, but because they can reinforce domestic hybrid structures and weaken the credibility of EU demands.

On May 18th, the German chancellor Friedrich Merz sent a letter to EU institutional leaders.⁵ In it, he suggested that the EU needed a new accession dynamic for the current candidate countries: Moldova, Ukraine and the Western Balkan states. For Ukraine, Merz proposed a tailor-made status that would grant the country access to EU decision-making bodies without voting rights, and to certain EU-funded programmes on a step-by-step basis. More concretely, Ukraine would gain access to all EU summits and meetings of the Council of the European Union but only with observer status and no voting rights. Ukraine would also gain a European commissioner with reduced powers, again merely to observe rather than fully participate.

The framing is explicitly geopolitical. Merz argued that enlargement “takes much too long” and that “understandably, this creates frustration” among candidate countries and within certain member states. He positions associate membership as a way out of the Ukrainian impasse, noting that Kyiv is aiming to sign the accession treaty by 2027, which under the current framework appears almost impossible.

The German proposal will require discussions among EU27 member states to be developed into a concept that would have to be endorsed by member states and candidate countries before its implementation. But below the paper suggests five principles for the EU to follow for its future enlargement approach to be successful.

Five principles for a successful approach

First, the EU needs to reconceptualise enlargement from a technocratic compliance exercise into what the Re-Engage framework calls an “embedded democracy” approach. Within this, the EU should foreground trust-building, social cohesion and the interaction between formal and informal institutions rather than treating formal alignment as a sufficient proxy for democratic consolidation. The embedded democracy approach as explained by Giske and Reiker (2026), seeks to foster democratic consolidation by strengthening both state and societal resilience, ensuring that candidate countries can withstand external pressures and internal destabilisation efforts. This approach explicitly targets the interaction between formal and informal institutions, and between top-down conditionality and bottom-up trust-building (Giske and Reiker, forthcoming 2026). The EU thus needs

⁵ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2026/05/21/merz-proposes-innovative-solutions-for-integration-of-ukraine-balkans-and-moldova/>

to invest in understanding and engaging the “shadow state” rather than only the “theatre state”.

Second, the EU should both strengthen and reorientate its conditionality instrument. Strengthening means making funding conditionality genuinely automatic when democratic backsliding occurs. The Georgia example (freezing European Peace Facility support) is a precedent worth institutionalising across all candidate country contexts. Reorientation means targeting conditionality not just at formal legal compliance but at visible, citizen-facing institutional performance: speed and accessibility of justice, genuine independence of anti-corruption prosecution, measurable media pluralism and protection of civil society from state harassment. In this way citizens everyday experience with governance will improve and their scepticism (shown across all case countries) may begin to decrease.

Third, the EU’s bottom-up investment must be structurally prioritised rather than rhetorically endorsed. This means redesigning EU funding instruments to support grassroots civic actors, independent media and community-level dialogue platforms, with simplified administrative requirements, protection from political retaliation and rapid response capacity. The Serbian protest movement is an untapped reservoir of democratic energy that the EU has failed to engage. This is because the bloc’s standard operating procedures favour institutional partners over social movements.

Fourth, the external actor dimension demands a coherent EU response strategy rather than case-by-case reaction. Russian disinformation requires EU investment in media literacy, information ecosystem resilience and support for independent journalism, not just sanctions on state media. Chinese infrastructure penetration requires EU financing alternatives that are truly competitive rather than bureaucratically slower and more demanding administratively. Turkish engagement in Muslim-majority communities requires the EU to acknowledge Turkey’s legitimate regional interests while insisting that partnership not come at the cost of democratic standards.

Fifth, the scenarios analysis in Metodieva and Daniel (2025), and Halas and Daniel (2025), suggest that the most likely near-term trajectory for most neighbourhood countries is neither “Going West” nor “Going East”. Rather, it is prolonged “Wavering” where external conditions improve (Russian capacity reduced, some Western unity maintained), but internal weaknesses persist. For the EU, this means designing democracy support for resilience under adverse conditions rather than

assuming a smooth transition pathway. It means investing in civil society's capacity to survive authoritarian pressure, in diaspora networks that maintain democratic socialisation and in municipal-level governance where reform is more legible and attributable than at the national level.

In this vein, the latest EU enlargement proposals coming from member states, Germany especially (although this is not yet a fully developed concept), must take into consideration the cultural and political dimensions of the enlargement policy, alongside conditionality. These three conditions combined make for a successfully revamped enlargement approach.

Conclusion

The way the EU's enlargement policy is set up presently is not enough to strengthen democratic resilience and security in the European neighbourhood. The logic of conditionality does not take into account how long hybrid regimes can last; its implementation design gives resources to people who do not have much support in society; and its assumptions about time are becoming more at odds with the need for action in geopolitics. The EU enlargement process that is based on institutions following the rules does not really address the social aspects of democracy that make it strong, like building trust again between people and institutions.

External actors make these problems worse by taking advantage of the structural gaps that the EU's technocratic approach creates. Russia does not need to provide better governance, all it needs to do is confirm hybrid governance and keep the networks going that profit from it. There is no need for China to be politically appealing, all it needs to do is offer economic resources without the strings attached that EU membership requires. It is not necessary for Turkey to fight EU enlargement, all it needs to do is show that regional consolidation can happen without democratic standards.

This does not mean EU strategy on enlargement is useless or unnecessary. The EU still has a unique credibility premium: as a normative power, as an economic anchor and as a symbolic point of reference for democratic ambition. But for the EU to truly understand what enlargement means for candidate countries, it needs to broaden its ideas. This should cover everything from following the rules, to becoming part of the community and building elite-level conditions to give people power in their own communities, to creating scenarios within which institutions can rebuild trust. But for democratic consolidation to happen in the European neighbourhood, above all

the EU needs to be willing to deal with the complex logic of governance, which includes the informal networks, trust gaps and social weaknesses that competing external actors are already deeply ingrained in.

The Re-Engage analysis, then, reaches a sobering but analytically rich conclusion: the EU's current enlargement policy is not enough to make its neighbours truly democratically resilient. Not because the goal is wrong or the EU does not have enough power, but because the tools they have do not work with the way things are run in accession countries. The enlargement framework remains the EU's most powerful tool to change its foreign policy; nothing else creates as strong of an incentive for change. But for it to work, there needs to be a credible membership perspective, which most accession countries do not have at the moment.

According to the Re-Engage studies, the strength of democracy in the areas surrounding the EU comes from people having faith in organisations, each other and the idea that working together can make things better. Promoting democracy from the outside can make trust possible, but it cannot make it happen. Because of this, the EU's most important addition might have less to do with conditions and more to do with showing that its normative power is worth focusing on and investing in.

References

Bøås, M., Giske, M. T. E., & Osland, K. (2024, April). Key concepts: Democracy and trust, hybrid regimes and resilience [Working paper]. RE-ENGAGE.

Bøås, M., Giske, M. T. E., & Rieker, P. (2024). Theory and Methods – Towards social theory. [Working paper]. RE-ENGAGE.

Bøås, M., & Bjørkhaug, 2026. Ukraine survey tabulation report [Unpublished project report]

Bonomi, M. (March 2026). Sequencing integration and accession; credibility of membership, IAI Brief No. 26|13.

Buras, P., Dumoulin, M., Kelmendi, T., & Marx, M. (2024). The interest of values: The EU's democracy promotion in the Western Balkans and the eastern neighbourhood. [Working paper]. RE-ENGAGE.

Brown, W. Kobzova, J. Popescu, N and Torreblanca, J. (2026). From Shield to Sword: Europe's offensive strategy for the hybrid age. ECFR. [From shield to sword: Europe's offensive strategy for the hybrid age – European Council on Foreign Relations](#)

Filipović, L., Petrović, V., & Pantelić, I. (2025). Trust, Social Cohesion and EU Democracy Promotion in Times of Acute Political Crisis - The case of Serbia. [Working paper]. RE-ENGAGE.

Giske, M. T. E., & Rieker, P. (2026, February). The need for a new approach: Enlargement of the EU in a time of geopolitical tension [Unpublished paper]. ARENA Centre for European Studies / NUPI.

Giske, M. T.E., & Rieker, P. (Forthcoming, 2026). "Beyond Legal Conditionality: Reclaiming the Political and Cultural Dimensions of EU Enlargement in Times of Geopolitical Contestation"

Giske, M. & Rieker, P. (2024). European Actorness in a Shifting Geopolitical Order, The European Union in International Affairs, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-44546-0_1

Greubel, J., Saris, L., Curin, V., & Mazzoni, T. (Eds.). (2026). Thinking Enlarged in 2026: Leveraging perspectives from future member states. European Policy Centre, EPC.

Halás, M., & Daniel, J. (2025). Pathways to the East, Pathways to the West: Four Scenarios of Eastern Europe in 2035. [Working paper]. RE-ENGAGE.

Machavariani, M., & Bolkvadze, K. (2025). Trust and Social Cohesion in Georgia's Path to Europe: Navigating Democratic Aspirations Amid Authoritarian Drift. [Working paper]. RE-ENGAGE.

Metodieva, A., & Daniel, J. (2025). Fractured, Integrated, at War? Five Scenarios for the Geopolitical Futures of Western Balkans in 2035. [Working paper]. RE-ENGAGE.

Nič, M., Maillard, S., Zweers, W., Bechev, D., & Xaviereff, N. (2026, March). Europe's Next Enlargement. *DGAP Policy Brief 6*. German Council on Foreign Relations. <https://doi.org/10.60823/DGAP-26-43448-en>.

Repovac-Nikšić, V., Silajdžić, L., Hirkić, M., Beširović, B., Kapidžić, D., Turčalo, S., & Kadić, V. (2025). Trust, Social Cohesion, and EU Democracy Promotion in Bosnia and Herzegovina. [Working paper]. RE-ENGAGE.

Richter, S., & Wunsch, N. (2019). Money, power, glory: The link between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(1), 41–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1578815>

Sterpu, V., Teosa, V., & Morari, C. (2025). EU's democracy promotion at the test of hybridity in the Republic of Moldova. [Working paper]. RE-ENGAGE.

European Western Balkans — “Merz proposes ‘innovative solutions’ for integration of Ukraine, Balkans and Moldova”, 21 May 2026
<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2026/05/21/merz-proposes-innovative-solutions-for-integration-of-ukraine-balkans-and-moldova/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Engjellushe Morina is a senior policy fellow with the European Security Programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. Prior to joining ECFR, she developed and led collaborative research projects on violent extremism and managed other initiatives such as a 1.5 track dialogue in North Macedonia. During the high-level negotiations over Kosovo's political status led by President Marti Ahtisaari, she served as an expert and consultant in the Cultural Heritage group within the Unity Team.

ABOUT RE-ENGAGE

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

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

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