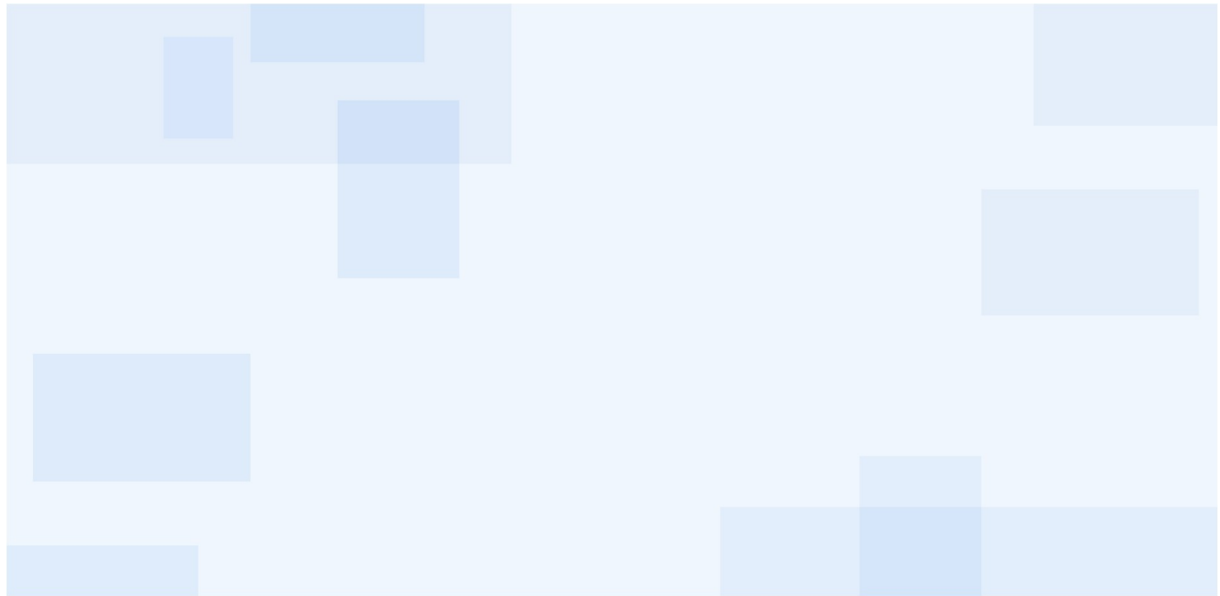


## Policy recommendations



# **“INDISPENSABLE AND IMPERFECTLY EFFECTIVE”: ADDRESSING THE DEFICITS OF EU DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD**



|                                          |                                                                                                                           |
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BACKGROUND PAPER | WORKING PAPER

# **“INDISPENSABLE AND IMPERFECTLY EFFECTIVE”: ADDRESSING THE DEFICITS OF EU DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD**

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22 June 2026



## SUMMARY

- **Hybrid regimes create systematic vulnerabilities.** In Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, patrimonial networks, media-politics nexuses, and degraded state-society relations let external actors — primarily Russia — embed themselves in domestic politics and compete directly with EU democracy promotion.
- **The central challenge has shifted.** The main obstacle is no longer passing reforms, but making them last: building public legitimacy and resilience against outside interference. Reforms are still not reaching the citizens who need them most. Rural, lower-income, and older populations remain disconnected from reform outcomes and most exposed to disinformation.
- **EU engagement suffers two compounding deficits.** A visibility deficit: 75% of Georgian respondents had no awareness of EU-supported projects, and only 15% could name a single one. Russian disinformation fills that vacuum. A legitimacy deficit: 45% see EU support as misallocated, with small local actors routinely sidelined in favour of large capital-city NGOs.
- **Organised civil society is a fragile partner in hybrid regimes.** Formal CSOs face co-optation, legal attack — Georgia's 2024 foreign agents law cut short RE-ENGAGE's own survey fieldwork — and capital-city concentration. The EU needs direct channels to self-organised civic actors operating on citizen-to-citizen trust.
- **Six cross-cutting recommendations are advanced:** strengthen communication and visibility; invest in societal trust; expand to civic actors beyond formal NGOs; adapt to hybrid regime dynamics; build resilience against external actors; advance confidence-building in breakaway territories.



## Introduction

This brief synthesises policy recommendations from the RE-ENGAGE research teams working on Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine<sup>1</sup>. All three teams used the same method: vignette-based surveys placing respondents in a realistic economic-crisis scenario to compare support from the EU, Russia, China, and Turkey; process tracing of EU-funded democracy projects; and interviews and focus groups with implementers, funders, and beneficiaries. All three reached the same conclusion: the main obstacle to EU democracy promotion is no longer passing reforms, but making them last, legitimate, and resilient to outside subversion. In Ukraine, elections have been suspended since February 2022 under martial law; when they resume, opposition parties may test anti-European slogans, making it urgent to consolidate pro-EU legitimacy now. Two compounding deficits run through the findings: a visibility deficit, where EU-funded reform stays largely unknown to the citizens it is meant to help; and a legitimacy deficit, where EU engagement is seen as elite-captured and disconnected from everyday life.

## Hybrid Governance, Patronal Networks, and Competing External Influences

Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine share the structural features of hybrid regimes: formal democratic institutions coexist with patrimonial networks, media-politics nexuses, and informal power structures that resist reform and open systematic doors to authoritarian influence. Russia has been the most active in walking through them: Georgian Dream's documented links to the Kremlin have shaped its turn away from European commitments, the Shor network moved roughly €25 million from Russia into Moldova on the eve of the 2024 elections, and a \$15 billion Russian loan once nearly persuaded President Yanukovich to reject the EU Association Agreement, until the 2013–14 Euromaidan protests overturned it.

RE-ENGAGE's vignette surveys make this competition concrete: respondents evaluated a fictionalised but realistic crisis scenario against support offered by the EU, Russia, China, and Turkey. The EU dominated as preferred partner — 77% of Georgian respondents placed full EU membership among their top three choices, and positive ratings of EU crisis assistance reached 68–95% across income groups in Moldova — but rivals retain traction where economic insecurity and limited media pluralism are highest: 41% of the poorest Moldovan respondents believed Russian narratives about subsidised energy. China was viewed in mainly

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<sup>1</sup> This brief synthesises research conducted as part of the RE-ENGAGE project (Horizon Europe, Grant Agreement No. 101132314) and draws on case studies carried out in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Full survey data, focus group findings, and source references are available in the underlying working papers: <https://re-engaging.eu/hybridity-and-hybrid-regimes-in-the-eastern-neighbourhood-in-a-time-of-war-and-increased-geopolitical-tensions/>; <https://re-engaging.eu/doors-unlock-and-open-hybrid-regimes-and-foreign-interferences-in-the-eastern-neighbourhood/>; <https://re-engaging.eu/trust-and-social-cohesion-in-georgias-path-to-europe/>; <https://re-engaging.eu/eus-democracy-promotion-at-the-test-of-hybridity-in-the-republic-of-moldova/>.

technocratic terms; Turkey as a pragmatic regional actor with particular reach among Turkic-speaking communities.

The consequence for EU engagement is structural. Standard technocratic tools — reforming laws, building agency capacity, funding registered organisations — work at the institutional surface of systems whose informal architecture actively undermines democratic consolidation, leaving the EU's strongest asset, its normative credibility, undercut by the visibility and legitimacy deficits described below.

## **Two Deficits: Visibility, Legitimacy, and the Gap Between EU Democracy Promotion and its Publics**

RE-ENGAGE's country surveys document the same pattern everywhere: a sharp gap between horizontal trust — in family, kin, and community — and vertical trust in institutions. In Moldova, 83–90% of respondents trust family members, while the national anti-corruption centre is trusted by only 34% and local government by 44–51%. In Georgia the gap is starker still: 18% trust the national government, 7% trust politicians, 42% trust religious leaders, and 32% say they would turn to loan sharks before local government in a financial emergency. When institutions are seen as instruments of political elites rather than guarantors of rights, citizens route around them through the informal networks that have historically proven more reliable. In Ukraine, 57.6% of respondents report no awareness of local civil-society trust-building work, and awareness of specific EU-funded programmes remains low (9.9% for Pravo-Justice, 28.1% for EUACI).

Process tracing of two EU-funded projects in Moldova shows how the two deficits play out, and why they need different responses. #Justice4Moldova faced a visibility deficit: 49% of respondents now see improvement in the justice system, up from 32% in 2023, and focus groups confirm the gain is information-dependent — people who know more about the reforms are more likely to believe progress is real. EU4Dialogue faced a legitimacy deficit: it built effective cross-community trust across the Transnistria and Gagauzia divides, but struggled to reach beyond NGO circles.

Formal civil society cannot close this gap on its own in hybrid-regime contexts: CSOs face co-optation, legal attack — Georgia's 2024 law cut RE-ENGAGE's own survey fieldwork short (488 respondents rather than the planned 560) — and concentration in capital cities. Yet civic mobilisation outside formal structures has proven far more resilient. Georgia's 'Yes to Europe, No to Russian Law' protests were self-organised, entirely outside registered CSO infrastructure. In Ukraine, Euromaidan, volunteer networks, and anti-disinformation initiatives like StopFake succeeded precisely because they sat outside the patronal structures that compromised formal institutions — horizontal trust there reaches 61.3% for civil-society organisations and 88.6% for kin, a resource the EU has so far only partly tapped.

These movements draw their resilience from horizontal, peer-to-peer trust, the same form of trust that citizens rely on in their everyday lives.

## Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1 targets the visibility deficit. Recommendations 2–4 address the legitimacy deficit: the structural reasons why EU engagement, even when visible, is not experienced as relevant or fair by those who most need it. Recommendations 5 and 6 address the external and territorial pressures that compound both.

### 1. Improve Strategic Communication and Visibility of EU Engagement

Across all three countries, EU democracy support remains largely invisible outside urban and elite circles. Citizens rarely connect EU-funded initiatives to tangible improvements in their own lives.

- **Develop a joint EU–country communication strategy targeting the community level** — local partnerships, public events, and accessible formats, including in rural and peripheral regions — clearly linking EU-funded initiatives to tangible everyday benefits (services, rights, economic opportunities) and to visible reform outcomes (justice services, anti-corruption results, infrastructure improvements).
- **Support local intermediaries** – local leaders, educators, and journalists – who can translate EU policies and reform outcomes into locally meaningful narratives, independent of central government channels.
- **Continue and strengthen support for independent media and civic education** to counter disinformation, with attention to linguistic and geographic dimensions of media vulnerability – Russian-language media in Moldova and Ukraine, regional divides in Georgia.

*Responsible actors: European Commission (DG NEAR), EU Delegations, national communication ministries.*

### 2. Invest in Societal Trust and Micro-Level Democratic Resilience

RE-ENGAGE’s survey evidence identifies a consistent pattern: lower-income, lower-education, older, and rural populations show the lowest institutional trust and the highest exposure to alternative narratives — exactly the populations through which hostile external actors gain the most influence.

- **Target interventions toward groups identified as having lower institutional trust:** low-income households, lower-education populations, older citizens, and residents of secondary cities and rural areas.
- **Implement targeted social and economic support measures addressing everyday vulnerabilities:** expanding access to local public services, supporting employment and income-generating initiatives, increasing access to education and skills development programmes.



- **Prioritise reforms that deliver immediate, visible improvements:** reducing case processing times through digitalisation, expanding legal aid for vulnerable populations, improving local infrastructure in underserved areas.
- **Expand civic education, youth programmes, and cross-community dialogue initiatives** that build democratic culture from the ground up, including in digital spaces.
- **Design all programming with built-in citizen feedback mechanisms,** tracking reform impact at the societal level, not only at the institutional level.

*Responsible actors: EU Delegations, national social affairs ministries, local civil society funds.*

### 3. Expand Partnerships Beyond Professionalized NGOs and Reach Civic Actors

All three country teams call for expanding EU partnerships beyond the capital to local authorities, regional organisations, and smaller CSOs. RE-ENGAGE's research adds a further point: in hybrid regimes, formal civil society faces co-optation, legal attack, and capital-city concentration. The EU needs channels to self-organised civic actors whose resilience comes from horizontal, citizen-to-citizen trust.

- **Expand EU-funded project participation** to local authorities, regional actors, and smaller NGOs, ensuring reforms address regional disparities and vulnerable groups.
- **Protect civic space and support actors under pressure:** oppose foreign agent-style legislation and integrate civic space protection into political conditionality and accession-related benchmarks; and establish rapid-response mechanisms — legal assistance, digital security, operational support — for civil society actors and journalists facing repression, self-censorship, and risk of closure.
- **Increase funding for independent and alternative media, particularly at the local level,** as a civic space protection measure - independent media that can operate without government control is a prerequisite for genuine civic participation.
- **Reach informal and unregistered civic actors directly:** develop small-grant, low-bureaucracy funding mechanisms for grassroots movements and individual actors who cannot or will not register as formal NGOs, and extend EU dialogue formats to include self-organised representatives — protest movement leaders, local journalists, community organisers — alongside formal NGO interlocutors

*Responsible actors: EU Delegations, DG NEAR, national civil society support funds.*

### 4. Tailor EU Engagement to Hybrid Regime Dynamics and Reduce Fragmentation

Standard technocratic reform models fall short where formal democratic structures coexist with informal authoritarian practice. All three country teams point to the same shortcomings: fragmented funding, heavy administrative burdens on local institutions, and no mechanism for adaptive learning.

- **Address informal governance networks**, including patronage and elite capture, as explicitly as formal institutional gaps; combine institutional reforms with trust-building and societal engagement measures.
- **Support accountability mechanisms that operate both formally and informally**, recognising that in hybrid regimes effective accountability often depends on informal civic pressure as much as formal institutional oversight.
- **Adopt 'smart conditionality'**: move from standard benchmarked conditionality toward positive incentives – sectoral integration, economic access, direct citizen-facing benefits – in exchange for verifiable partial reform progress; apply clear and consistent consequences for democratic backsliding and for restrictive legislation targeting civic space.
- **Ensure flexibility in programming** to allow rapid adaptation to political change, including backsliding, electoral shifts, or government realignment.
- **Transition from project-based funding to sector-wide programmatic support**, reducing duplication and prioritising capacity-building at mid-level civil service where implementation gaps are most acute.
- **Strengthen long-term reform ownership**: shift toward co-created reform agendas aligned with national priorities; expand direct budget support mechanisms where governance standards permit.

*Responsible actors: European Commission, EU Delegations, national governments.*

## 5. Strengthen Resilience Against External Actors and Economic Dependencies

Russia — and increasingly China — exploit economic dependencies, media environments, and social fragmentation to expand their influence. RE-ENGAGE's research on foreign interference describes how negative external actors do so “by embedding themselves within these patronal networks and exploiting their resistance to institutional reforms” (Bolkvadze, Gueudet, Machavariani, Petrov, Stercul, Sniadanko, Strazzari & Teosa, 2024) — using energy dependence, trade relationships, banking links, and cultural soft power across all three countries.

- **Support independent media ecosystems and counter-disinformation initiatives**, increasing funding for independent media particularly at the local level; investing in media literacy for groups most vulnerable to disinformation.
- **Promote economic diversification and reduce dependency risks**, building on progress achieved – Moldova's energy independence from Russian gas, Ukraine's EU energy market integration – while addressing remaining vulnerabilities.
- **Strengthen DCFTA implementation** through targeted capacity-building, particularly in sectors where EU market access has not yet reduced Russian economic dependency.
- **Apply EU transparency and governance standards to all infrastructure investment**, including Belt and Road Initiative projects, as conditions for EU co-financing.

- **Seek partnerships with moderate religious and cultural leaders** to counter the portrayal of Western values as threats to national identity – a narrative actively promoted by Russia through the Russian Orthodox Church’s networks in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Highlighting shared values of social justice and community development can foster a more nuanced public dialogue.
- **Link EU governance support to hybrid threat resilience strategies:** integrate cybersecurity, electoral integrity, and strategic communication into democracy programming, not treat them as parallel security instruments.

*Responsible actors: European Commission, EU Delegations, national energy and trade ministries.*

## 6. Advance Confidence-Building in Breakaway Territories

Georgia and Moldova both face breakaway territories that Russia has used as leverage through its ‘de facto state playbook’: blocking accession pathways, diverting resources from state-building, and entrenching social division.

- **Pursue confidence-building measures in cultural, social, and economic fields** with populations in breakaway territories; develop cooperation platforms that have demonstrably brought Transnistrian and Gagauz populations closer to Moldovan and European values, and replicate this approach where feasible.
- **Rethink territorial engagement strategies** specific to each breakaway context in Georgia, Moldova; sustain people-to-people programming as a long-term investment in democratic resilience.
- **Frame conflict resolution explicitly as a democracy promotion agenda:** unresolved territorial disputes divert resources from reform, sustain societal polarisation, and block accession pathways. EU conflict engagement should be integrated with, not separated from, democracy programming.

*Responsible actors: European External Action Service, OSCE, EU Delegations.*

## Country-Specific Recommendations

The six recommendations above apply across all three contexts. What follows sets out what makes each country distinctive, and why certain recommendations are most urgent in each case — moving past the EU’s former one-size-fits-all approach, which has already shown its limits.

## Georgia

Georgia is distinctive because the main obstacle to EU democracy promotion is no longer a reluctant reform partner, but the government itself. RE-ENGAGE's research traces this to Ivanishvili's Kremlin ties, which it finds instrumental in shaping GD's pro-Russia stance — driving the 2024 foreign agents law, anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, a strategic partnership with China, and the suspension of accession commitments. Institutional trust is the lowest recorded anywhere in RE-ENGAGE (18% trust government, 7% politicians), a vacuum Russian soft power exploits through the Orthodox Church. Fear and self-censorship pervade political life, per RE-ENGAGE interviews: as one respondent put it, 'Why risk it? Nothing changes anyway.' Yet Georgia also produced RE-ENGAGE's most striking counter-finding: the foreign agents law cut short its own fieldwork, but also triggered the largest civic mobilisation in Georgia's post-independence history. The spontaneous 'Yes to Europe, No to Russian Law' protests sat entirely outside registered CSO infrastructure — exactly the civic actor this brief argues the EU must engage. Pro-European sentiment remains high (86% see the EU as essential for the economy), yet only 15% could name a funded initiative: Georgia's deficit is legitimacy, not visibility.

**The most pressing priorities for Georgia are: *Actively protect and expand civic space***  
The EU should adopt a more proactive and protective approach by explicitly addressing and opposing restrictive laws targeting CSOs, including foreign agent-style legislation; integrating civic space protection into political conditionality and accession-related benchmarks; establishing rapid-response mechanisms to support civil society actors and journalists facing legal or political pressure; increasing funding for independent and alternative media, particularly at the local level; providing legal assistance, digital security, and operational support to organizations at risk of closure or stigmatization. *Tailor democracy promotion to hybrid regime dynamics*  
**The EU should implement context-sensitive strategies by** addressing informal governance networks, including patronage and elite capture; combining institutional reforms with trust-building and societal engagement measures; supporting accountability mechanisms that operate both formally and informally; ensuring flexibility in programming to respond to rapid political changes; and applying conditionality credibly — including clear consequences for democratic backsliding and restrictive legislation targeting civic space — as engagement without enforcement legitimises GD's trajectory.

## Republic of Moldova

Moldova is distinctive because EU conditionality operates alongside genuine government partnership: the Sandu administration has placed accession at the centre of its agenda, with negotiations launched in December 2023 and the EU Growth Plan (€1.9bn, 56 reforms) providing a structured framework. The binding constraint is not institutional willingness but whether reforms reach citizens — Moldova's deficit is visibility, not legitimacy. The survey reveals a strategically

important pattern: dissatisfaction is contained (only 6–12% fully dissatisfied) but mobile, concentrated among residents of Bălți and the north, Russian-language media consumers, and lower-income citizens — precisely those least reached by EU-funded reform. Process tracing confirms the fix: informed citizens perceive more progress (49%, up from 32% in 2023), and cross-community trust-building works but stays confined to NGO circles unless scaled.

**The most pressing priorities for Moldova** are *Strategic communication (visibility deficit)*: "Development of a joint EU–Moldova communication strategy focused on citizens, with the objective of increasing visibility of tangible reform outcomes (justice services, anti-corruption results). Continue to support independent media and civic education to counter disinformation. Localise communication efforts to rural and underserved communities." *Socio-economic inequalities as a trust issue (trust distribution finding)*: "Target interventions toward specific groups identified in the survey as having lower institutional trust and higher openness to alternative narratives, including low-income households, individuals with lower levels of education, older populations, and residents of economically vulnerable urban areas and secondary cities." *Expanding partnerships beyond professionalized NGOs (legitimacy deficit)*: "EU-funded projects should be expanded to participation of local authorities, regional actors, and smaller NGOs, to achieve — even on a smaller scale — tangible and visible results for communities. This ensures that reforms address regional disparities and vulnerable groups, strengthening social cohesion."

## Ukraine

Ukraine's context is distinctive in combining active war, an exceptional pre-existing civic infrastructure, and the risk that wartime emergency displaces governance reform. Patronal structures once enabled Russian penetration, until 2014 and 2022 forced reforms to oligarchic media control, energy dependency, and judicial independence — a baseline now exposed to new capture risk from reconstruction financing. Ukraine therefore faces both deficits at once: visibility acutely, under wartime conditions; legitimacy structurally, since reconstruction risks recreating the old patronal networks. That civic infrastructure is itself an asset: from Euromaidan to wartime volunteer networks (Come Back Alive) and anti-disinformation initiatives (StopFake), citizen-led mobilisation has proven more resilient than formal institutions — exactly the horizontal trust this brief argues the EU must better leverage.

**The most pressing priorities for Ukraine:** *Leveraging horizontal trust as a strategic resource* The RE-ENGAGE findings indicate persistently high levels of horizontal trust in Ukrainian society — 88.6% in kin, 61.3% in civil society organisations — which has repeatedly functioned as a key infrastructure for democratic mobilisation (2004; 2013–2014; 2022). EU engagement remains



predominantly oriented towards formalised, grant-eligible civil society organisations with the administrative capacity to meet reporting requirements. Informal and grassroots networks are often central to rapid response and local mobilization, yet they remain only partially integrated into existing support frameworks. The EU should broaden the range of eligible civil society actors through funding instruments calibrated to smaller-scale or less formalised initiatives, with proportionate compliance requirements, and ensure diversification within the civil society funding portfolio to avoid over-concentration of resources among a limited number of large organisations. *Intensifying local ownership* The Integrity Cities model, deployed by EUACI in partnership with Mykolaiv and other municipalities, provides empirical evidence that institutional reform takes hold most durably when co-designed with local actors who bear political responsibility. The Mykolaiv case demonstrates measurable outcomes — including over UAH 10 million in identified savings and its ranking as the most transparent frontline city — supported by procedural changes codified in normative documents. The EU should prioritise programmatic engagement at municipal and oblast level while maintaining national-level conditionality channels for accession screening, and design funding instruments that prioritise technical and expertise-based assistance over disbursement-driven indicators. *Addressing the visibility gap* Survey findings indicate that 57.6% of respondents report no awareness of local civil society trust-building activities, alongside similarly low recognition of EU-funded programmes (9.9% for Pravo-Justice; 28.1% for EUACI). The EU should develop communication strategies that link EU support to tangible, lived outcomes — improvements in public services, transparency in procurement, accessibility of local governance — and strengthen counter-Eurosceptic and anti-populist information within the Ukrainian population, particularly given that elections banned under martial law since February 2022 may, when held, see opposition parties test anti-European slogans.

## Conclusions

The RE-ENGAGE evidence converges on one conclusion: effective EU democracy promotion depends less on how much the EU does than on whether that work reaches people, is legible to them, and becomes socially embedded. Reforms that do not reach citizens are not reforms in any politically meaningful sense. The EU remains the most credible external partner across all three countries — but the gap between the EU as a normative ideal and the EU as an experienced reality is widening wherever reform benefits stay concentrated among already-connected elites. Closing that gap — by communicating concretely, partnering beyond professionalised NGOs, maintaining credible conditionality, and protecting the civic actors who sustain democratic culture outside formal institutions — is the most urgent task for EU democracy promotion in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

## 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).

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