



European Contestations of EU Democracy Support in Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine

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Authors: Nona Mikhelidze, Andrea Gawrich, Fabian Schöppner, Anna Osypchuk, Anton Suslov

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Abstract

This paper examines how European actors contest and reinterpret the European Union's democracy support in Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine across pivotal political turning points: Georgia's candidate status and electoral crises (2022–2024), Armenia's trajectory from the 2013 Association Agreement reversal through the Velvet Revolution to the post-Karabakh crisis (2017–2025), and Ukraine's Euromaidan protests and the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion. Across the cases, the EU emerges as both a cautious supporter and an uneven enforcer of democratic conditionality, while local civil societies appear as democratic drivers, ruling elites as obstacles, and Russia as the external antagonist. When conditionality is inconsistently applied, as in Georgia, the Union undermines its credibility; when external threats reveal the limits of Russian influence, as in Armenia and Ukraine, the EU shows greater capacity for adaptation and decisive action.

The findings demonstrate that contestation within the EU shapes democracy support in uneven ways: discourse often signals learning and adjustment, yet practice remains constrained by geopolitical calculations and entrenched approaches. The analysis underscores the EU's ambivalence between strategic pragmatism and normative commitments, raising the broader question of whether it can unlearn ineffective patterns and act as a genuine promoter of democracy in its eastern neighbourhood.

Introduction and Analytical Framework

The conceptual framework of the SHAPEDEM-EU project introduces a fresh perspective on EU democracy support by framing it as a network of interconnected communities of practice. At the core of this network are three primary groupings: communities focused on EU democracy support practices, those involved in local democratisation efforts, and others engaged in broader EU foreign affairs practices (Achraimer and Pace, 2024).

The EU is conceptualised as a “multilevel polity” (Hooghe and Marks, 2001), encompassing central institutions such as the European Council, the Council of the EU, the European Parliament, the European Commission, The European External Action Service (EEAS), and delegations in third countries. It also includes interest groups (civil society organisations, political parties, lobbies) and individuals (activists, human rights defenders). Within this multilevel structure, communities of practice (CoPs) emerge, consisting of actors who engage in debates, negotiations, and the implementation of EU democracy support practices (Achraimer and Pace, 2024).

A crucial concept in this framework is *contestation*. Contestation refers to social practices that involve objections to specific issues of concern. In the context of international relations, it entails behaviour or discourse expressing disapproval of norms. Contestation is a vital mechanism for fostering reflection, adaptation, and renewal. It enables the identification and critique of inefficient practices within EU democracy support. To advance, the EU must engage in processes of *de-learning* and *un-learning* its entrenched approaches to democracy support. By shedding outdated methods and assumptions, the EU can move away from replicating ineffective practices and towards genuinely supporting local democratisation efforts (Achraimer and Pace, 2024).

The recent history of Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine offers critical case studies for examining EU democracy support. Over the past decade, number of revolutionary events have marked significant turning points in the democratic trajectory of these countries and have triggered periods of reflection within the EU. These moments allow the EU to assess events, evaluate their approaches, and consider possible adjustments. Such periods of reflection may or may not lead to meaningful (un)learning or changes in discourse and behaviour.

Key questions arise: To what extent did this reflection result in “self-enlightenment” and tangible changes? Which actors altered their (discursive) practices, and why? The broader question is: Can the EU evolve into a learning institution capable of recognising the need for, and the value of, un-learning its deeply embedded approaches to democracy support in its eastern neighbourhood?

To explore these questions, we examine if and how various actors within the EU as a “multilevel polity” have assessed, represented, and contested pivotal events in the case countries. This includes analysing the EU’s democracy-related policy responses and the extent to which these events led to internalised changes at the political discourse level. Which actors participate in contestation, and who acts as gatekeepers? Who is heard, who speaks but is ignored, and who is actively silenced? Beyond the powerful voices of EU institutions like the Council, Commission, and Parliament, which other actors (e.g., civil society organisations, think tanks, businesses, lobby groups) have access to contestation?

To assess contestation, the paper analyses the discursive practices using four methodological devices: Setting: The stage defined in narratives; characters: How actors are portrayed (heroes, villains, or victims); plot: The connections between characters and the policy setting, adding interpretation to the story; moral of the story: The policy solutions proposed in relation to the setting, characters, and plot. This includes the EU’s role and the instruments it employs (e.g., conditionality, sanctions) while identifying gaps, challenges, or double standards in EU policies.

By analysing these elements, the research aims to understand: How the EU has narrated and responded to pivotal events in Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine; whether contestation (if any) has led to policy changes at the discourse level and democratic (un)learning within the EU; through this lens, it assess how the EU, as a multilevel polity, navigates internal and external contestation to advance – or hinder – democracy support practices in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

1 Historical Turning Points in Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine

In June 2022, while Ukraine and Moldova were granted EU candidate status, **Georgia** received only a European perspective accompanied by a list of 12 conditions. Brussels explained this decision by pointing out that, although Georgia performed comparably to Ukraine and Moldova in the technical implementation of the Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), its democratic credentials and progress toward democratic transition lagged significantly. By autumn 2023, the European Commission reported that Georgia had fulfilled only three of the 12 conditions. Key areas such as – de-oligarchizing, depolarisation, judicial reform, and others— requiring substantial political will – remained largely unaddressed (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2023).

However, in December 2023, despite falling short of the EU’s conditions for candidate status, Tbilisi was unexpectedly granted the designation (European Council, 2023). This decision bolstered the ruling Georgian Dream party while undermining efforts for meaningful democratic reform. Rather than spurring progress, the EU’s failure to enforce conditionality effectively backfired. The Georgian government interpreted candidate status as validation of its approach, intensifying authoritarian measures. It reintroduced the controversial “foreign agents’ law” (dubbed the “Russian law”) and proposed anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, drawing stark parallels with regressive policies seen in Russia.

These moves triggered mass protests across Georgia and drew widespread condemnation from the European Union, individual member states, and international human rights organisations. In response, Brussels began discussing the possibility of halting Georgia’s EU integration process. Protests

temporarily subsided in anticipation of the October 2024 parliamentary elections, as many hoped that a democratic change of government could address the country's political crisis.

However, those hopes were dashed. The ruling party orchestrated massive electoral fraud and, soon after the elections, announced the suspension of Georgia's EU integration process. This move was unconstitutional, violating Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution, which mandates every government to uphold the country's Euro-Atlantic integration path.

The announcement sparked an unprecedented wave of nationwide protests, uniting generations and regions under a single demand: new parliamentary elections; the scale and intensity of these protests reflecting not only the profound discontent with the ruling party's actions against Georgia's path towards the EU but also the widespread desire for a return to democratic norms and constitutional governance.

Thus June 2022, December 2023, and October 2024—along with the ongoing protests—mark pivotal turning points in Georgia's democratic transition as well as in the EU's approach to supporting democracy in the country.

Armenia's modern history has been shaped by several pivotal turning points that have redefined its political trajectory. In 2013, after years of negotiations, Armenia unexpectedly decided not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. Instead, it pivoted toward deeper integration with Russia by choosing to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) alongside Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia. Armenia's foreign policy U-turn, however, took place under heavy pressure from Russia with whom Armenia already cooperated in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) (Delcour, 2018). Despite this dramatic pivot from Brussels, Armenia managed to continue along a kind of silent Europeanisation trajectory (Delcour and Wolczuck, 2015).

A significant moment came in November 2017 with the signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the European Union. This agreement allowed Armenia to strengthen economic and political ties with the EU while maintaining its commitments to the EAEU. CEPA symbolised Armenia's attempt to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy, seeking cooperation with Europe without severing ties with Russia.

However, the growing dissatisfaction with the internal policy of Sargsyan led to the Velvet Revolution in April and May of 2018. A peaceful uprising, spearheaded by opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan, resulted in the resignation of Sargsyan and a dramatic shift in Armenia's political landscape. For the first time since gaining independence, Armenia saw a transition of power driven by popular demand rather than elite manoeuvring, bringing renewed hopes for democratic reform.

The country's security challenges remained unresolved, though. In 2020, a war erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, reigniting a long-standing conflict. The fighting, which lasted from September to November, ended with Azerbaijan regaining large parts of the disputed territory (Yavuz and Gunter, 2022). The loss was a devastating blow to Armenia, both politically and militarily, forcing it to reassess its regional alliances and strategic priorities.

The most recent turning point came in 2023, when Armenia once again found itself at the centre of a geopolitical shift. The blockade of the Lachin Corridor, followed by Azerbaijan's renewed military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh, fundamentally altered the country's security landscape. This period of crisis ultimately led the Armenian government to take the unprecedented step of freezing its participation in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), signalling a significant

departure from its traditional reliance on Russian security guarantees. In February 2025, Armenia's parliament approved a bill to initiate the process of joining the European Union with holding a referendum on EU membership as the next step in this process.

Thus, three crucial turning points – 2013, 2017-2018 and 2023-2025 – in Armenian political developments have ushered in key inflection points in the EU-Armenian relations.

Turning to **Ukraine**, the country's democratic development and its relationship with the European Union have been shaped by two key turning points: 2013–2014 and 2022. In November 2013, the pro-Russian government of President Yanukovich refused to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, triggering a mass uprising known as the Maidan or the Revolution of Dignity. While this pro-European and anti-authoritarian movement led to snap presidential and parliamentary elections, subsequent democratic reforms and efforts to integrate with the EU and NATO were soon overshadowed by Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Following the restoration of a democratic government through elections and the signing of the Association Agreement in 2014, the EU expanded and diversified its support for Ukraine's reforms. Given the ongoing Russian hybrid aggression, this support has focused not only on deepening Ukraine's European integration and strengthening democratic institutions but also on enhancing the country's resilience.

In 2022, Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine, dramatically altering the geopolitical landscape and prompting the EU to swiftly reassess its long-standing "integration-but-not-accession" policy. EU integration had long been viewed not only as a means of fostering economic and political development but also as a way to bolster Ukraine's ability to address security threats. In response, the Ukrainian government applied for EU membership just four days after the invasion began. Following four months of discussions and deliberations, the EU granted Ukraine candidate status in June 2022, formally paving the way for accession reforms, including those aimed at strengthening democracy.

Thus, the two key turning points – 2013-2014 and 2022 – have profoundly shaped Ukraine's democratic development and its evolving relationship with the EU.

2 Mapping Key Actors and Analysing Discourse on Democracy Support Across Historical Turning Points

A wide range of European actors shape the discourse on the EU's democracy support in Georgia, Armenia, and Ukraine. All major EU institutions play a role, including the European Council, the Council of the EU, the European Parliament, and the European Commission. The Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and the EU Delegations in these countries hold particularly crucial roles. Other institutional mechanisms, such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the Neighbourhood Investment Facility (NIF), and the European Peace Facility (EPF), also contribute to interactions with these states.

Key EU institutions closely monitor developments in Georgia, Armenia, and Ukraine, issuing statements and shaping the discourse on democracy. High-ranking officials play an active role in this process, whether representing their institutions or voicing personal perspectives. Within the Commission, the President, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the Commissioner for Enlargement are among the most influential figures commenting on democracy. Similarly, the Presidents of the European Council and the European Parliament, along with individual Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), frequently engage in discussions on these issues.

Beyond institutional actors, the Eastern Partnership Implementation Summits and Meetings serve as important platforms for discursive engagement. European NGOs and think tanks also play a significant role in analysing and assessing the democratic landscape in Georgia, Armenia, and Ukraine. These non-governmental actors often bring a more diverse range of perspectives, critically evaluating both the state of democracy in Eastern Europe and the EU's policies and initiatives supporting democratic development.

To assess contestation among and within the above-mentioned actors, as said the paper analyses the discursive practices using four methodological devices: Setting: The broader narrative framework that defines the stage (e.g., Georgia, Armenia, and Ukraine described as "hybrid regimes" or "states in transition toward democracy"); characters: How different actors are portrayed – whether as heroes, villains, or victims. For example, citizens of these countries may be framed as "heroes" defending democracy and "victims" of authoritarianism, while governmental institutions or foreign actors (e.g., Russia) may be depicted as villains; plot: The connections between characters and the policy setting, adding layers of interpretation to the narrative. For instance, events such as protests against the "Foreign Agents (Russian) Law," Armenia's Velvet Revolution, and Ukraine's Euromaidan may be portrayed as "uprisings." Moral of the story: The policy solutions proposed in response to the setting, characters, and plot. This includes the EU's role and the instruments it employs at the discursive level (e.g., conditionality, sanctions), as well as an analysis of gaps, challenges, or double standards in EU policies.

2.1 Georgia

As mentioned above in June 2022 **Georgia**, instead of candidate status, was offered only a European perspective, contingent upon fulfilling 12 specific conditions. Brussels defended this decision by highlighting that, despite Georgia's performance in implementing the Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), its democratic progress and commitment to political transition remained significantly behind.

Analysing the discourse of state and non-state actors within European institutions regarding the assessment of democracy and the rationale behind this decision, there appears to be no significant contestation or divergence of views.

In 2022, the appointment of four Supreme Court justices by Georgia's Parliament ignited widespread criticism from international organisations, civil society, and opposition lawmakers. The ruling Georgian Dream party pushed through the nominations despite concerns over transparency, judicial reforms, and the legitimacy of the selection process. Opposition MPs condemned the move as an attempt to solidify a so-called "judicial clan" and accused the government of deliberately stalling much-needed reforms to address judicial corruption. The EU delegation in Georgia voiced their disappointment, emphasising that the appointments violated commitments tied to judicial reforms and EU financial assistance. Civil society organisations similarly denounced the process as flawed and illegitimate, calling for comprehensive justice reforms before any further appointments. Against this backdrop, European Parliament President Roberta Metsola reaffirmed Georgia's place in the "European family" but underscored those reforms in the judiciary and rule of law remained crucial for the country's European path. Meanwhile, a Brussels-based think tank, CEPS, argued that Georgia's political regime has long contradicted the EU's core democratic values, particularly regarding institutional integrity and the rule of law. According to CEPS, the root of these issues lies in the concentration of political power in the hands of an unelected and unaccountable oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili, exemplifying a case of state capture (Emerson and Blockmans, 2022).

This growing concern over Georgia's democratic trajectory was further reflected in the European Parliament's resolution of 9 June 2022, which condemned violations of media freedom in the country and urged Georgian authorities to uphold the highest democratic standards, including judicial independence, fair trials, and fundamental freedoms. The resolution linked these concerns directly to Georgia's European aspirations, calling on its government to demonstrate genuine political commitment to reforms as a prerequisite for EU candidate status. While recognising the legitimacy of the Georgian people's European ambitions – evidenced by the country's formal application for EU membership in March 2022 – the resolution made clear that accession must be based on merit, requiring full compliance with democratic principles outlined in Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union ([European Parliament, 2022a](#)).

The European Commission assessed Georgia's application based on its ability to meet the Copenhagen (1993) and Madrid (1995) criteria, acknowledging progress in macroeconomic stability and the implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement. However, it highlighted ongoing challenges, including political polarisation, judicial independence, high-level corruption, and threats to media freedom. Concerns also remained over human rights protections, law enforcement accountability, and the need for "de-oligarchizing" reforms. As a result, the Commission recommended that Georgia be granted only a European perspective rather than candidate status ([European Commission, 2022a](#)). The Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) of the European Parliament emphasised that candidate status for Georgia remained within reach, but only once its government demonstrated concrete progress on the outlined priorities ([European Parliament, 2022b](#)).

Throughout 2023, thus prior to the second historical turning point when in December the EU decided to grant Georgia with a candidate status, European actors maintained a critical stance toward Georgia's EU integration efforts, emphasising concerns over democracy, judicial independence, media freedom, and political polarisation.

The European Commission's Analytical Report (1 February 2023) acknowledged some progress in judicial reforms but stressed persistent deficiencies in judicial independence, law enforcement accountability, public procurement, and financial transparency. It called for comprehensive reforms to strengthen democratic institutions and the rule of law ([European Commission, 2023a](#)). On 15 February 2023, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling on the Council to consider imposing sanctions on Bidzina Ivanishvili for his role in Georgia's deteriorating political environment ([European Parliament, 2023a](#)).

In response to the Georgian Dream government's attempt to introduce a "foreign agents" law, the Renew Europe group in the European Parliament (14 March 2023) condemned the move as a threat to democracy. MEP Urmas Paet warned: "Georgia's draft foreign agent law would have been a step in the wrong direction. The people of Georgia want a European path, but this law is a step towards Russia" ([Goleanu, 2023](#)). MEP Petras Auštrevičius expressed solidarity with Georgia's civil society, praising its role in advancing democratic reforms ([Goleanu, 2023](#)).

The criticism intensified on 27 April 2023, when MEP Thijs Reuten (S&D – Netherlands) rightly accused the Georgian government of disregarding the country's pro-European aspirations, stating: "Georgian Dream prefers cosyng up with Orbán and other anti-rights or Putin friends over working on EU candidate status" ([Reuten, 2023](#)). During the EU–Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee meeting (8 June 2023), MEP Marina Kaljurand described Georgia's progress on the EU's 12 priorities

as “incomplete, patchy, and often superficial” ([European Parliament, 2023b](#)). Days later, on 15 June 2023, EU Ambassador Pawel Herczynski stressed the importance of de-oligarchizing, urging Georgia to address the influence of vested interests in politics ([Civil.ge, 2023](#)). On 22 June 2023, EU Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi acknowledged that Georgia had completed three of the 12 priorities outlined by the EU but emphasised that significant reforms were still necessary ([Várhelyi, 2023](#)).

The European Commission’s human rights report reiterated concerns over judicial independence, political polarisation, and threats to media freedom, noting that discrimination against minorities and gender-based violence remained critical issues ([External European Action Service, 2023a](#)). The European Commission’s staff report further criticised amendments to the Election Code adopted in June 2023, arguing they contradicted OSCE/ODIHR recommendations and weakened electoral integrity by centralising power over the Central Election Commission (CEC) in the ruling party’s hands. With parliamentary elections approaching in 2024, concerns over electoral transparency and fairness remain high ([European Commission, 2023b](#)).

Overall, European actors consistently pressed Georgia to uphold democratic principles, urging reforms in judicial independence, electoral integrity, media freedom, and anti-corruption measures. While the EU reaffirmed its support for Georgia’s European aspirations, progress toward candidate status remained conditional on addressing these fundamental challenges.

However, in December 2023, despite falling short of the EU’s conditions for candidate status, Tbilisi was unexpectedly granted the designation triggering a turning point in Georgia and its relations with the EU. This decision strengthened the ruling Georgian Dream party while weakening efforts for genuine democratic reform. Instead of driving progress, the EU’s inability to enforce conditionality had the opposite effect. The Georgian government took the candidate status as an endorsement of its approach, doubling down on authoritarian measures. It revived the contentious ‘foreign agents’ law (referred to as the “Russian law”) and introduced anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, echoing repressive policies in Russia. These actions sparked widespread protests across Georgia.

In response, a unified stance emerged within the European Union against Georgia’s proposed “Transparency of Foreign Influence” law. EU Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Peter Stano strongly criticised the law, warning it could hinder Georgia’s EU aspirations by undermining civil society, media freedom, and democratic principles. He emphasised that the law would distance Georgia from its European integration goals ([European Commission, 2024a](#)).

The European Parliament’s Delegation for Relations with the South Caucasus similarly expressed concern, urging the Georgian government to withdraw the draft law and engage with civil society to uphold democratic values and human rights ([European Parliament, 2024a](#)). MEPs echoed this sentiment in a joint resolution, calling for the immediate withdrawal of the law and stressing its potential to derail Georgia’s EU membership ambitions ([European Parliament, 2024b](#)).

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen also voiced concern, urging the Georgian government to heed public protests and implement necessary reforms for EU integration ([von der Leyen, 2024a](#)). High Representative Josep Borrell, alongside other EU officials, warned that such developments, including the rising violence and disinformation, were pushing Georgia further away from EU integration (Borrell, 2024a). In addition, the Venice Commission criticised amendments to Georgia’s electoral code, citing the lack of consensus-building and transparency, and urging reforms to ensure impartiality and public trust in election processes (Venice Commission, 2024). To align its

criticism with policy actions, the EU has frozen €30 million in support for Georgia from the European Peace Facility, signalling a firm stance on the importance of democratic reforms.

Georgia's 2024 parliamentary elections, another historical turning point for the country, were marked by serious irregularities, including voter pressure, institutional interference, and legislative concerns affecting fundamental freedoms. The OSCE/ODIHR report reiterated its findings, stating that election conditions 'compromised the ability of some voters to cast their vote without fear of retribution' and that post-election complaints were not sufficiently considered, limiting legal remedies ([OSCE, 2024a](#); [EEAS, 2024a](#); [European Parliament, 2024c](#); [OSCE, 2024b](#)). The EU emphasised the need for urgent electoral and judicial reforms, with High Representative Josep Borrell warning that without decisive changes, Georgia's European integration prospects would be at risk ([Borrell, 2024b](#)).

The European Parliament called for new elections under international supervision and urged sanctions against Georgian leadership, stating that the government's actions were 'incompatible with Euro-Atlantic aspirations' ([European Parliament, 2024d](#)). The EU stressed repealing restrictive laws like the "Transparency of Foreign Influence" act, tackling disinformation, and improving institutional independence. The forcible suppression of protests and arrests further heightened concerns, with the EU calling on Georgia to "[prioritise] rule of law, institutional reforms, and inclusivity" to restore its European trajectory ([EEAS, 2024b](#)).

Following the 2024 parliamentary elections, the ruling party unilaterally announced the suspension of Georgia's EU integration process—a move that directly violated Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution, which obligates all governments to advance the country's Euro-Atlantic path. This unconstitutional decision ignited an unprecedented wave of nationwide protests, bringing together citizens across generations and regions under a unified demand: new elections. For over 100 days, protests have persisted, met with mass arrests of human rights activists and the adoption of repressive legislation as the government seeks to suppress dissent.

EU Foreign Policy Chief Kaja Kallas condemned the crackdown on protesters, opposition figures, and journalists, demanding the release of detainees and thorough investigations into allegations of torture and human rights abuses. The EU has urged the Georgian government to de-escalate tensions, safeguard fundamental rights, and reaffirm its commitment to European integration ([Kallas, 2024](#)). Meanwhile, the Council reiterated its support for Georgia's EU path, strongly condemning violence against peaceful demonstrators, media, and politicians while calling for urgent democratic reforms and alignment with EU principles ([EEAS, 2024d](#)). The EU has suspended visa-free travel for Georgian diplomats, officials, and their families holding diplomatic and official passports. They will now be required to obtain a visa for short stays of up to 90 days within any 180-day period in the Schengen Area ([European Council, 2025a](#)).

Similarly to other European institutions, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) strongly condemned Georgia's democratic backsliding, highlighting electoral irregularities, human rights abuses, and the erosion of fundamental freedoms. The Assembly expressed concerns over the legitimacy of the October 2024 parliamentary elections, citing voter intimidation, political interference, and a lack of fair electoral conditions. It also criticised the government's suspension of Georgia's EU accession process, which triggered mass protests and a deep political crisis. PACE denounced police brutality against demonstrators, the misuse of the judiciary to suppress opposition and civil society, and the shrinking space for democratic engagement. It urged Georgian authorities to commit to European democratic standards, hold new internationally monitored elections, and release political prisoners. The Assembly called for immediate reforms, including repealing the Law on

Transparency of Foreign Influence and ensuring accountability for human rights violations. As a response, PACE temporarily suspended several rights of Georgia's parliamentary delegation, restricting their participation in key committees and election observation missions. However, it maintained dialogue with Georgian civil society and opposition groups and left open the possibility of reconsidering the delegation's status in April 2025 if significant democratic progress is made ([Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2024](#)).

The European think tank's analysis of Georgia's parliamentary elections and its deepening democratic backsliding aligns closely with the EU's position on the unfolding crisis. It calls on Brussels to take decisive action to prevent Georgian Dream from staging a crackdown reminiscent of Belarusian leader Aleksandr Lukashenko's (Atasuntsev, 2025; de Waal, 2024), including imposing targeted sanctions – such as asset freezes on the ruling party's leader (Ax and Victor, 2025) – and providing sustained support to local civil society groups and independent media (Akhvlediani, 2024).

2.2 Armenia

The Armenian U-turn in 2013—its abrupt refusal to sign the Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) treaty—followed by its announcement to join the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015, marked a pivotal moment in EU-Armenia relations. This move initiated a “period of silence” between Armenian authorities and EU institutions, with both sides recalibrating their engagement.

While the European Council adopted a reserved and forward-looking tone, refraining from open criticism, the European Parliament took a franker stance. The Council's response, as reflected in the Eastern Partnership Summit Joint Declaration of 2013, reaffirmed the EU's commitment to cooperation and emphasised the principle of sovereign choice for each partner: “The EU and Armenia have today reconfirmed their commitment to further develop and strengthen their cooperation... the Summit participants reaffirm the sovereign right of each partner freely to choose the level of ambition and the goals to which it aspires in its relations with the European Union” (Council of the EU 2013). This language downplayed the rupture and emphasised continuity, even pointing to “enhanced cooperation” in areas such as justice, freedom, and security across all Eastern Partnership countries.

By contrast, the European Parliament expressed clear frustration with Armenia's decision, framing it as undemocratic and imposed under Russian pressure. In a resolution passed shortly after the U-turn, the Parliament underlined the need for respect for civic protest and civil liberties, stating: “The Armenian authorities decided instead to join the Customs Union, following Russian pressure... [The EP] reminds the Armenian authorities that the protests and demonstrations against this decision are an expression of the free will of the country's citizens... persecution and detentions are violations of the rights of assembly and expression... and run counter to recent rhetoric of commitment to shared values with the EU” ([European Parliament, 2013](#)).

Prior to this reversal, there had already been acknowledgments—both explicit and implicit—of external pressure from Russia. Yet, while MEPs like Elmar Brok and Jacek Saryusz-Wolski publicly criticised Moscow's influence and lamented Armenia's turn away from Europe, such concerns were largely absent from official declarations. Brok stated pointedly: “Europe has not lost Armenia. Armenia has lost the European perspective,” while Wolski, though more diplomatic, regretted the wasted effort on both sides (Chilingarian, 2013).

A Parliament resolution from December that year expressed regret that Armenia opted to join the Customs Union, following Russian pressure, and reminded Armenian authorities to respect their citizens' right to protest ([European Parliament, 2013](#)).

Surprisingly, these narratives of pressure and disappointment were not reflected in the Joint Declaration of the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit in 2013. Armenia's decision to withdraw from the AA negotiations is not mentioned, nor is Russia's role—likely overshadowed by the dramatic parallel withdrawal by Ukraine. This erasure of geopolitical tensions from the formal summit language underscores the EU's cautious balancing act in maintaining engagement with Eastern partners without openly antagonising Russia ([European Council, 2013](#)).

In the aftermath, although Armenia had decisively pivoted towards Moscow under President Sargsyan, the EU refrained from closing the door. Rather than fundamentally rethinking its discursive approach to Armenia or learning from the setback, EU institutions—especially the Commission—chose to reframe the episode as a sovereign choice, avoiding a more critical or strategic reassessment. The potential democratic implications of Armenia's move received limited attention in official EU documents. This critical change in Armenia's foreign policy did not produce a definitive learning effect for the EU. Rather than distinctly modify its discourses related to Armenia, the EU reacted to Armenia's decision to back out of the AA signature by remaining open to new future policies.

In early 2014, the European Parliament expressed optimism that Armenia, despite abandoning the AA process, could make democratic progress with EU support. Referring to the 2013 allocations under the Eastern Partnership Integration and Cooperation (EaPIC) programme, it placed Armenia alongside Georgia and Moldova as countries capable of advancing reforms in democracy and human rights ([European Parliament, 2014](#)).

At the civil society level, the NGO *European Friends of Armenia* (EuFoA) emerged as a key actor. Based in both Brussels and Yerevan, EuFoA positioned itself as a bridge-builder between Armenian and EU political and civil actors. Prior to Armenia's withdrawal, the organisation framed democratic ambitions as central to EU-Armenia negotiations. After the U-turn, however, its tone became more cautious. Rather than issuing direct critiques, EuFoA curated and redistributed statements of disappointment from other European actors (e.g., Radio Free Europe), avoiding public comment on the shift itself. Notably, the pivotal 2013 Vilnius Summit was absent from the organisation's publications. Instead, EuFoA highlighted the continuation of visa liberalisation talks—presenting this as a sign of ongoing, if limited, cooperation ([European Friends of Armenia 2013a–c](#)).

In sum, Armenia's abrupt foreign policy shift prompted a fragmented and somewhat muted EU response. While Parliamentarians voiced concern and frustration, official EU discourse remained anchored in principles of sovereignty and engagement. The episode revealed gaps in EU coherence, limited institutional learning, and a reluctance to challenge geopolitical realities head-on. The discursive framing downplayed both the democratic backsliding implied by the move and the geopolitical leverage exerted by Russia—raising broader questions about the EU's capacity for critical (un)learning in its democracy support practices.

Two years after Armenia's withdrawal from the Association Agreement, negotiations resumed between Yerevan and Brussels, culminating in the 2017 signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Although the agreement included references to democratic reforms, it carefully avoided evaluative judgments, portraying Armenia as a democracy without addressing its authoritarian characteristics at the time. CEPA only entered into provisional application after the

Velvet Revolution in June 2018, suggesting that political change in Armenia—rather than shifts in EU policy—was the decisive factor for its activation.

The rhetoric surrounding CEPA negotiations echoed the EU's earlier tone. High Representative Federica Mogherini, at a Cooperation Council meeting in May 2017, described the agreement as merely the “next step” in the bilateral relationship, reaffirming the EU's willingness to “expand and deepen cooperation with Armenia” ([European Council, 2017a](#)). The European Parliament remained largely silent on the negotiations until after the signing but welcomed the agreement in 2018. Together with EURONEST, it expressed support for ensuring that ordinary Armenians would not be affected by external sanctions ([European Parliament, 2018a](#); [Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, 2018a](#); [Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, 2018b](#)).

During the unfolding of the Velvet Revolution, EU institutions responded with caution. Likely concerned about triggering escalation or being perceived as interfering, their reactions were measured. On 22 April 2018, after Nikol Pashinyan and nearly 200 protesters were arrested, a spokesperson for Mogherini issued a statement affirming the right to peaceful assembly and urging Armenian authorities to respect their international obligations, particularly under the European Convention on Human Rights. The EU called for the immediate release of those detained and stressed the need for restraint, responsibility, and inclusive dialogue (ArmenPress, 2018).

When Pashinyan was released the next day and Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan resigned, the EU delegation to Armenia ‘took note’ of the resignation and praised the peaceful nature of the political transition. It urged a national dialogue that included all political stakeholders ([EEAS, 2018a](#)). Upon Pashinyan's election as Prime Minister on 8 May, Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn issued a joint statement affirming that the process had adhered to constitutional norms and emphasising their readiness to work with the new government—again framing the moment as an opportunity for inclusive dialogue.

In June 2018, the European Parliament sent a delegation of nine MEPs, led by Foreign Affairs Committee Chair David McAllister, to Armenia. McAllister lauded the peaceful nature of the protests and the high degree of civic engagement, describing the moment as pivotal for strengthening democracy, fighting corruption, and deepening EU-Armenia ties. He stressed that both citizens and leaders had demonstrated commitment to reform and that the EU would support this process “every step of the way” ([EEAS, 2018b](#)).

In July, European Council President Donald Tusk and Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker each met with Pashinyan during a NATO summit. Tusk remarked, “What happened in Armenia was extraordinary and, I must say, very European,” (PanArmenian, 2018) while Juncker emphasised the inspiring nature of Armenia's peaceful transition and reiterated EU readiness to support its reform agenda ([Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2018](#)).

By November 2018, the European Commission had reviewed the second year of the EU's Single Support Framework for Armenia (2017–2020), interpreting the Velvet Revolution as a popular call for stronger democratic governance. The Commission recognised the transitional government's programme of organising early elections and laying the groundwork for reform in transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. The report also acknowledged the challenges of consolidating democratic gains and noted that public consultations were underway across various sectors, with an emphasis on regional engagement and increased civic involvement, especially among women and youth.

Despite the stark contrast between Armenia's 2013 pivot toward the Eurasian Economic Union and the 2018 Velvet Revolution, the EU's discursive approach remained largely consistent. While the contexts differed significantly, both events were framed within a sovereignty-centred narrative. The EU did not substantially revise its rhetoric or strategic approach in response to Armenia's domestic transformations. Pashinyan's arrest and the repression of protests in April 2018 were met with concern but framed as issues of legal proportionality and human rights, rather than systemic critique. Once the protests gave way to elections, EU discourse quickly shifted to one of optimism and partnership.

As in 2013, the EU's response remained reactive and conditional: engagement was to proceed only upon Armenia's initiative. The EU remained eager to deepen cooperation, but its actions and rhetoric reflected an enduring reluctance to exert normative pressure or take a proactive stance. The Revolution was viewed as a legitimate expression of Armenian sovereignty, and cooperation was presented not as an incentive for reform but as a response to it—continuing the pattern of supporting rather than shaping democratic transformations.

The 2020 Second Karabakh War marked a turning point in modern Armenian history. Armenia's defeat by Azerbaijan and the subsequent fallout reshaped the country's political landscape and even led to constitutional changes. Yet, the European Union's stance toward Armenia did not immediately reflect this seismic shift. A meaningful change in EU narratives only began to emerge once Brussels reassessed Russia's role in the region.

In the initial phase of the conflict, beginning in October 2020 with Azerbaijan's offensive in the separatist region of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), EU institutions were hesitant to assume an active role in mediation. While European Council President Charles Michel underscored the normative basis of EU-Armenia relations, security concerns dominated the discourse. At the time, Russia was still viewed as the principal guarantor of Armenian security. Michel stated: 'Finally, the last item I would like to mention is Nagorno-Karabakh. We were debriefed by the High Representative. Several Member States have sent us their analyses, including the French President. I have personally had the opportunity to speak to President Aliyev and to the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, this week. Of course, we call for an immediate cessation of hostilities. We stand ready, alongside all stakeholders, to endeavour to encourage a resumption of political dialogue in the framework of the Minsk Group within the OSCE, as we believe this is the only option to stem the escalation of violence in the hostilities. We consider it essential to ensure stability and security. We shall continue to be highly active in this matter, and we naturally intend to do our best to guarantee the protection of people in the region as far as we can.' ([European Council, 2020a](#)).

A similar position was expressed by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who reiterated the need for urgent de-escalation and warned against any military solution or external interference ([European Commission, 2020](#)). When a humanitarian ceasefire was agreed on 10 October 2020, the EU issued a cautious statement welcoming the development but expressing deep concern over ongoing violations and civilian casualties ([European Council, 2020b](#)). The emphasis remained on immediate humanitarian issues, with no attempt to frame the conflict in geopolitical or normative terms. The EU, in this phase, presented a united front but refrained from positioning itself as a key mediator or questioning the prevailing security order.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, EU discourse remained largely unchanged. In January 2021, the European Parliament passed a resolution reiterating the need for a cessation of hostilities and for humanitarian assistance ([European Parliament, 2021a](#)). A second resolution in mid-2021 called for the release of prisoners of war ([European Parliament, 2021b](#)), but did not broaden the scope to link human

rights or security issues to Armenia's domestic political trajectory. Even in meetings such as that between Michel and Pashinyan, references to 'security, stability and prosperity' and to 'human values and democracy' appeared only in general closing remarks, detached from a more integrated narrative ([Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2021](#)).

By March 2022, however, a shift in parliamentary discourse began to take shape. A resolution condemning the destruction of Armenian cultural heritage sites in Nagorno-Karabakh explicitly linked the protection of such heritage to the promotion of lasting peace and democracy ([European Parliament, 2022c](#)). In its 2022 review of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the European Parliament expanded on this theme, warning that the presence of Russian 'peacekeepers' and the consequences of the 2020 hostilities should not be allowed to derail Armenia's political development or reform agenda. This marked the first significant discursive departure from earlier frameworks, acknowledging the precariousness of Armenia's democratic trajectory and the need to address it in strategic terms. Still, other EU institutions remained cautious and slower to follow suit.

A more definitive narrative shift took place in 2023, as events on the ground triggered what could be described as a *learning effect* within EU institutions. Azerbaijan's blockade of the Lachin Corridor and the forced displacement of Karabakh Armenians catalysed a broader reassessment of regional dynamics. In response, the EU established the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in February 2023, a follow-up to the EU Monitoring Capacity in Armenia (EUMCAP) initiated the previous autumn ([European Council, 2022a](#)). While EUMA operated only with Yerevan's approval and was therefore confined to Armenian territory, its very establishment signalled a growing EU willingness to engage more substantively in regional security.

Importantly, these developments were accompanied by a significant discursive transformation. Russia's failure to uphold its obligations under the CSTO, combined with its inaction during Azerbaijan's escalation in Karabakh, weakened its perceived credibility as a regional security provider. EU institutions began to explicitly reference this shift. The European Parliament characterised the threats facing Armenia as 'hybrid attacks against its constitutional order and democratic institutions,' ([European Parliament, 2024c](#)) moving away from a purely humanitarian or diplomatic framework. Commissioner Thierry Breton drew a direct line between geopolitical tensions in the South Caucasus and Russia's broader war of aggression against Ukraine, reframing the conflict as part of a wider confrontation between autocracy and democracy. President Michel went as far as to say that Russia had 'betrayed' the Armenian people ([Lory and Jones, 2023](#)).

This narrative culminated in a high-level meeting in 2023 between Prime Minister Pashinyan and EU leaders—President von der Leyen, High Representative Josep Borrell—joined by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and USAID Administrator Samantha Power. The gathering served to 'reaffirm support for Armenia's sovereignty, democracy, territorial integrity, and socio-economic resilience' ([European Commission, 2024b](#)). Von der Leyen emphasised that the EU and Armenia were increasingly aligned in values and interests. She commended Armenia's democratic reforms and its efforts to enforce EU sanctions against Russia, particularly by preventing the transfer of dual-use technologies to the Russian military.

This moment marked a fundamental discursive shift. Armenia's security was no longer viewed in isolation from its democratic development. The EU began to conceptualise the safeguarding of Armenia's territorial integrity as directly tied to the sustainability of its democratic institutions. This reframing suggests that, by 2023, the EU had moved beyond its earlier reactive posture, embracing a more integrated strategic view of Armenia's role in the regional and normative order.

2.3 Ukraine

The dominant narratives and discourses within the EU regarding Ukraine before November 2013, and the onset of mass protests in Kyiv, largely framed the country as a weak or developing democracy. Ukraine was portrayed as a post-Soviet state plagued by corruption, a shadow economy, oligarch-controlled media, and fragile institutions. While some recognition was given to its vibrant civil society and competitive electoral system, Ukraine was not widely regarded as a fully democratic country. Additionally, Russian-backed narratives about an East-West divide and alleged discrimination against Russian-speaking populations gained traction in Western media and academic circles after 2005, further shaping external perceptions of Ukraine's political landscape.

By 2013, despite the EU's progress toward signing an Association Agreement (AA) with Ukraine, this agreement was primarily seen as an economic arrangement rather than a step toward deeper political integration. From the EU's perspective, the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the AA represented the furthest extent of engagement it was willing to offer Ukraine. While pro-democracy actors and communities of practice (CoPs) in Ukraine continued to advocate for eventual EU membership, such a prospect remained off the table in Brussels. This disconnect between Ukrainian aspirations and EU policy would soon become a critical point of contention, as events unfolded on the ground.

The protests that erupted in November 2013 initially centred on students and activists opposing President Yanukovich's decision to reject the AA. However, following the brutal police crackdown on protesters by the Berkut special police unit on November 30, 2013, the movement escalated into a broader struggle for fundamental democratic rights, including freedom of speech and assembly. This shift in focus marked a transformation in both the framing and naming of the movement: what began as 'Euromaidan' – emphasising European integration – evolved into 'Maidan' and, ultimately, the 'Revolution of Dignity', underscoring the fight for human rights and resistance to Yanukovich's autocratic rule. While these terms reflected the protesters' self-identification, they were quickly absorbed into wider discourses, both supportive and contesting. The label 'Revolution of Dignity' gained increasing prominence as the movement intensified, culminating in the dramatic events of February 18-20, 2014.

During the Maidan events and their aftermath, key EU officials and institutions, while striving to maintain neutrality and act as mediators between authorities and protesters, ultimately aligned themselves with the Maidan participants and their cause. The EU placed responsibility for the 'use of excessive force' ([European Council, 2014](#)) squarely on the Ukrainian authorities, framing the protests as a democratic movement crucial for Europe. EU leaders openly expressed support for the demonstrators, highlighting the broader significance of their struggle. Commissioner for Enlargement Štefan Füle underscored the enduring importance of democracy, stating that 'Maidan reminded us all that the value of democracy can never be underestimated – you have to take care of it and, sometimes, you have to take a strong stance and defend it' ([European Commission, 2014a](#)). Similarly, Commission President José Manuel Barroso emphasised that 'the Ukrainian people demonstrated why Europe is important, what Europe means and what Europe stands for... Freedom, democracy, and rule of law... the values which are at the core of the European Union' ([European Commission, 2014b](#)). The European Parliament and several Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) echoed this sentiment, praising 'the democratic spirit and resilience of the Ukrainian people after two months of courageous protests' ([European Parliament, 2014a](#); [Euractiv, 2014](#)) and reaffirming support for Ukraine's European perspective ([EU Monitor, 2014](#)).

Throughout this period, EU representatives assumed two primary roles in the dominant discourse: first, as staunch supporters of democratic 'European' values, reinforcing the idea that Maidan was not just a national uprising but part of a broader European struggle for democracy; and second, as mediators attempting to broker a resolution between the conflicting parties. This dual positioning underscored the EU's engagement in Ukraine's transformation while also reflecting the limitations of its direct influence in shaping events on the ground.

The violent escalation on February 20, 2014, when Berkut forces opened fire on protesters, marked a turning point. In an effort to defuse the crisis, the EU facilitated an agreement between the opposition and President Yanukovich on February 21, 2014. However, the deal was rendered void when Yanukovich fled to Russia, prompting Ukraine's Parliament to call for a presidential election in May 2014. Discursively, this sequence of events was framed as a victory for the protesters, albeit one achieved at a tremendous human cost after three months of continuous demonstrations and significant loss of life.

A critical juncture in the Maidan movement was its framing as a democratic protest grounded in European values. This perception shaped the initial phase of reflection within the EU, leading to the conclusion that Europe needed to adopt a more active role in supporting democracy in Ukraine. The EU's response centred on leveraging the mechanisms of the Association Agreement (AA) and pursuing deeper integration. However, this consensus was not without contestation. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán ([Sadecki, 2024](#)) and certain far-right and far-left politicians – many of them Eurosceptics – challenged the dominant narrative of Maidan.

Criticism emerged on three levels. First, some Eurosceptic parties and politicians outright rejected the notion that Maidan was a democratic uprising, instead portraying it as a 'coup d'état' allegedly orchestrated by the US or the EU ([Petsinis, 2015](#)). Second, while some EU member states supported democracy promotion in Ukraine in principle, they objected to specific instruments the EU used to assist Kyiv, such as economic sanctions on Russia or military aid to Ukraine. Third, certain political forces within the EU contested the very classification of Ukraine as a democratic state. They pointed to legislative issues, minority rights, language policies, media freedom, corruption, judicial weaknesses, and Ukraine's military actions against 'separatists' in Donetsk and Luhansk ([Syriza, 2014](#)). For instance, Orbán argued that 'Ukraine can be neither stable nor democratic if it does not give its minorities, including Hungarians, their due' and pushed for autonomy for regions with sizable Hungarian populations ([VoaNews, 2014](#)). Some far-right and far-left politicians went even further, denouncing Ukraine's anti-terrorist operations in Donbas as anti-democratic and targeting the 'people of Donbas.'

This phase of discourse evolved significantly in response to Russian aggression. The next chapter in the EU's framing of events was heavily shaped by Russian propaganda, which promoted narratives of Ukraine's 'East/West divide,' a 'pro-Russian Crimea,' and the claim that the 'people of South-East Ukraine and/or Donbas' had freely chosen to align with Russia. While Russia had previously been seen as merely supporting Yanukovich and certain factions within Ukraine, by February 2014, it was increasingly recognised as the primary perpetrator threatening Ukraine's sovereignty. However, EU discourses initially lagged in fully acknowledging Russia's direct military role. In the early months of the crisis, narratives still included references to 'separatists,' 'pro-Russian activists,' and 'referendums,' inadvertently echoing Russia's strategic messaging of 'we are not there' and 'the people of Crimea/South/Donbas have made their choice' ([European Parliament, 2014b](#)).

Despite this initial hesitancy, the European Parliament gradually adopted stronger language, with resolutions explicitly referring to 'pro-Russian separatists led in most cases by Russian special forces'.

This shift marked a crucial turning point in EU rhetoric, as the bloc moved from a more cautious, mediated framing of the conflict to a more assertive acknowledgment of Russia's aggressive actions and its role in destabilising Ukraine.

The EU condemned Russia's annexation and occupation of Crimea, responding with its first set of sanctions. However, these measures were met with resistance from some EU member states. Governments in Hungary ([BBC, 2014](#)), Slovakia, and the Czech Republic (Luhn, 2014), along with several European far-right parties (Dodman, 2014), questioned the effectiveness and necessity of imposing sanctions, arguing that they could harm economic ties with Russia. Despite this internal contestation, the EU proceeded with its strategic engagement with Ukraine by signing the Association Agreement (AA), signalling political and economic support for the country.

In Ukraine, communities of practice (CoP) largely welcomed the EU's political backing, its support for civil society, and the reform initiatives launched under the AA framework. However, there was significant criticism from Ukrainian actors regarding the EU's perceived lack of robust measures against Russia's hybrid aggression. Many felt that the EU and its member states were not exerting enough pressure on Russia or providing Ukraine with the necessary means to defend itself. This sentiment shifted slightly in mid-2014 after the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 and the escalation of warfare in Donbas in July-August, when Russian regular troops were confirmed to be operating in occupied territories. These events led to a firmer display of political support and greater EU unity in backing Ukraine.

By the summer of 2014, the EU and its institutions were gradually realising that democracy support in Ukraine was not solely about fostering internal reforms—it was about defending Ukraine as a democracy against Russia and its proxies. This shift in understanding influenced both rhetorical and material support for Ukraine's state-building efforts. Key reforms gained momentum, including decentralisation, the restructuring of state monopolies and companies (such as Naftogaz, Ukrzaliznytsia, and Ukrposhta), anti-corruption initiatives (establishment of independent agencies, procurement and tender procedure reforms), and the early stages of judicial reform. A significant aspect of this reform wave was the emphasis on digitalisation as a tool for combating corruption and enhancing citizen engagement.

Within EU narratives surrounding Ukraine's European integration—encompassing the AA, visa-free travel, and broader political alignment—corruption was consistently framed as the primary obstacle. Corrupt politicians, civil servants, state institutions, and oligarch-controlled media were identified as major threats to Ukraine's democratic future and reform progress. This discourse not only justified EU involvement in supporting governance reforms but also reinforced the idea that Ukraine's struggle was as much about overcoming internal challenges as it was about resisting external aggression.

Thus, back to 2014 and in the aftermaths, the EU officials maintained a unified and synchronised narrative, demonstrating the EU's capacity for institutional learning and adaptation in response to geopolitical shifts. This alignment in discourse extended beyond the EU itself. International intergovernmental organisations echoed the EU's official stance, prioritising support for Ukraine's democratic development, good governance, and territorial integrity ([International Monetary Fund, 2014](#)). While these organisations did not specifically emphasise the Maidan movement, they reinforced the broader framework of democracy support in Ukraine.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), both within the EU and internationally, displayed more variation in their positions depending on political alignment and institutional affiliation. For instance,

analysts at Carnegie Europe largely agreed that Maidan was a positive turning point but diverged on policy recommendations. Some advocated for increased pressure on Ukrainian political elites to drive reforms ([Sasse, 2014](#)), others emphasised direct support for civil society ([Dempsey, 2014](#)), while another faction pushed for the EU to adopt a more assertive geopolitical role.

Despite these nuances, significant contestation regarding the EU's democracy support in Ukraine remained limited. Dissenting voices—whether questioning Ukraine's democratic trajectory or the EU's approach—were largely marginal or partisan. Rather than undermining the dominant narrative, these critiques served to highlight the overall consolidation of EU discourse, reinforcing the perception that democracy support in Ukraine was not just a policy choice but a strategic and normative imperative.

The 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked another historical turning point, triggering a period of reflection that – despite its brevity – led to profound shifts in EU-Ukraine relations, EU foreign and security policies, and the EU's approach to democracy support. What makes this transformation particularly striking is its unprecedented unity; the EU's response has been more cohesive than ever before.

Before February 24, 2022, Ukraine's EU membership was not a serious prospect in political discussions. However, almost immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion, EU rhetoric shifted dramatically. Ukraine's candidacy was swiftly endorsed – not only as an act of solidarity and support but also as a powerful political and symbolic statement of immense normative significance. By June 2022, this shift was formalised with the granting of candidate status, marking a historic transformation in EU-Ukraine relations.

This moment also saw an important fusion of narratives: supporting democracy in Ukraine became inseparable from supporting Ukraine as a democracy. The discourse evolved to frame Ukraine's struggle as a fight for democratic, European, and Western values – especially in the face of aggression by an authoritarian regime openly hostile to democratic principles. Additionally, concerns emerged that Russia's ambitions extended beyond Ukraine, reinforcing the perception that its war was not just against one country but against democracy itself, the West, and Europe as a whole.

Unlike previous moments of reassessment, which were often shaped by discursive contestations among various Communities of Practice (CoPs) or external actors debating democracy support, this period of reflection was primarily driven by the sheer force of unfolding events. The invasion itself acted as a catalyst, prompting a rapid recalibration of rhetoric, policy, and action.

While some contestation has remained within the discourse on democracy support in Ukraine, as well as on Ukraine's democratic credentials, such challenges were marginal. In most cases, they originate from actors who question not just Ukraine's democracy but the very principles of EU democracy support or even democracy itself. This pattern closely mirrors the dynamics of 2014, when the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas prompted moments of epiphany and reassessment within the EU. Then, as now, the crisis forced the EU to re-evaluate its approach, reinforcing the perception that democracy support is not merely a policy choice but an existential imperative in the face of authoritarian aggression.

The European Council, the EU Parliament, the European Commission, and the High Representative maintained a unified and resolute stance in their rhetoric following Russia's full-scale invasion. Their statements framed the invasion as not only an attack on Ukraine but also a direct assault on European stability and the international order. They placed full responsibility on Russia, vowing accountability and emphasising Ukraine's sovereign right to determine its own

future. The urgency of their messages underscored the unprecedented nature of the aggression: ‘It is President Putin who is bringing war back to Europe. In these dark hours, the European Union and its people stand by Ukraine and its people. We are facing an unprecedented act of aggression by the Russian leadership against a sovereign, independent country. Russia's target is not only Donbas, the target is not only Ukraine, the target is the stability in Europe and the whole of the international peace order. And we will hold President Putin accountable for that’ ([von der Leyen, 2022](#)).

The European Council reinforced this message by declaring: ‘By its illegal military actions, Russia is grossly violating international law and the principles of the UN Charter and undermining European and global security and stability. The European Council underlines that this includes the right of Ukraine to choose its own destiny. Russia bears full responsibility for this act of aggression and all the destruction and loss of life it will cause. It will be held accountable for its actions’ ([European Council, 2022c](#)). The EU also made a clear commitment to supporting Ukraine: ‘Calls for the EU and its Member States to continue providing the strongest possible economic and financial support to Ukraine ... including in defence- and security-related areas, to activate any EU budget instruments available and to develop a long-term strategy to support Ukraine’s efforts in strengthening the resilience of its democratic institutions and economy’ (European Parliament, 2022d). The statement further stressed, ‘These are among the darkest hours for Europe since World War II. A major nuclear power has attacked a neighbouring country and is threatening reprisals on any other state that may come to its rescue’ ([Borrell, 2022](#)).

This rhetoric was reinforced by international organisations, particularly NATO, as well as the majority of EU member states, civil society organisations, political parties, experts, and activists. Their framing emphasised that Ukraine was not only defending its sovereignty but also fighting for shared European values: ‘This leaves the Ukrainian people fighting with their lives in the streets, cities, and villages not only for their country, but also for our common struggle to defend the European values of democracy, fundamental freedoms, and civilised international relations against a common enemy. They deserve from the EU every form of support that it is capable of giving’ (CEPS, April 12, 2022).

At its Versailles summit, the EU declared that ‘Ukraine belongs to the European family,’ while European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen assured President Zelensky that ‘Ukraine’s European path has now begun’ ([CEPS, 2022](#)). These statements signalled a historic shift in EU-Ukraine relations and reinforced the convergence of narratives that framed support for Ukraine as synonymous with the defence of democracy.

Conclusions

Starting with Georgia, as we see, the narrative across historical turning points unfolds within the broader context of Georgia’s European integration efforts and the EU’s conditionality-based approach to democracy support. It focuses on key political events between 2022 and 2024, particularly the EU’s decision to grant Georgia candidate status despite democratic backsliding. The political landscape is marked by judicial reforms, media freedom concerns, and increasing government authoritarianism, culminating in the suspension of Georgia’s EU integration process.

At the heart of the story are its key characters. On one side, Georgian civil society and opposition figures emerge as defenders of democracy, resisting authoritarian policies and advocating for European values (thus heroes). The European Union and its institutions, including the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the OSCE/ODIHR, position themselves as guardians of

democratic principles, using diplomatic pressure and policy measures to push for reforms. In contrast, the ruling Georgian Dream party, along with its leader Bidzina Ivanishvili (villains), stands accused of consolidating power, weakening democratic institutions, and suppressing opposition voices. The victims of this power struggle include Georgian citizens – particularly protesters, opposition figures, journalists, and human rights activists – who face repression and persecution. Democratic institutions, including the judiciary, media, and electoral processes, also suffer under political interference and authoritarian tactics.

The plot unfolds with increasing tension. Initially, Georgia's exclusion from candidate status in 2022 serves as a warning from the EU, a call for reform that is met with resistance from the ruling party. As the European Commission continues to outline necessary reforms, the government refuses to comply, and instead, European warnings are met with further democratic backsliding. Then comes the unexpected twist – December 2023, when the EU, despite all its previous concerns, grants Georgia candidate status. Rather than encouraging reforms, this decision emboldens the government, which perceives it as an endorsement of its approach rather than a call for change. Instead of progressing toward democracy, the ruling party doubles down, reviving restrictive laws and tightening its grip on power. By 2024, the situation reaches a breaking point. The parliamentary elections, marred by irregularities, trigger even larger protests, with citizens demanding new elections and a return to a pro-European course. The government, however, takes a dramatic step in the opposite direction – it unilaterally announces the suspension of Georgia's EU integration process, violating its own constitution. This sparks an even greater wave of resistance, with protests lasting over 100 days, escalating tensions between the government and the people.

The moral of the story is a cautionary one. Georgia's trajectory illustrates the unintended consequences of the EU's failure to enforce strict conditionality in its enlargement process. By granting candidate status prematurely, the EU not only weakened its own credibility but also empowered an increasingly authoritarian government. Instead of serving as an incentive for democratic reform, candidate status was misinterpreted as approval of the ruling party's actions. This narrative highlights the delicate balance between geopolitical strategy and democratic principles, raising the question of whether the EU can maintain its influence without compromising its fundamental values. As Georgia stands at a crossroads, the outcome remains uncertain, but one lesson is clear: democracy cannot be assumed – it must be actively defended.

The analysis of Georgia's political trajectory within the broader framework of EU democracy support reveals deep-seated tensions between institutional learning and entrenched policy approaches, particularly in the gap between rhetoric and action. Key European actors, including EU institutions – the European Commission, European Parliament, and European Council – along with independent think tanks and media outlets, largely speak with one voice in shaping the discourse on democracy support. These actors generally provide a well-founded assessment of both the progress and setbacks in Georgia's democratic development and the EU's role in fostering it. Notably, the European Parliament has been more vocal in condemning democratic backsliding and advocating for stricter conditions, while the European Commission has often prioritised geopolitical stability, at times at the expense of democratic rigor.

Overall, the EU appears to have made progress in institutional learning, particularly in refining its discourse on democracy support. However, the real challenge lies in translating this discourse into concrete policy decisions. The EU's decision to grant Georgia candidate status despite clear democratic

regression underscores the complexities of its conditionality-based approach. As a result, rather than fostering democratic reform, the EU at times inadvertently reinforces authoritarian tendencies.

The trajectory of EU-Armenia relations across these three major turning points in modern Armenian politics reveals a narrative defined less by bold shifts than by hesitant pivots. At the outset, when Armenia reversed course in 2013 and declined to sign the Association Agreement—opting instead for the Russian-led Customs Union—the EU responded with studied restraint. It affirmed Armenia’s sovereign right to choose its foreign policy path but remained notably silent on the domestic political conditions surrounding that choice. In privileging geopolitical non-confrontation, the EU effectively compromised on its democratic agenda. The increasingly authoritarian tendencies of then-President Serzh Sargsyan and former President Robert Kocharyan were not openly contested. Even in the face of credible reports of Russian pressure, the EU refused to frame Armenia as a victim of coercion or its leaders as complicit in democratic backsliding. This early episode foreshadowed a pattern: the EU consistently upheld the principle of sovereignty, but often at the expense of confronting autocratic drift. It cast itself as a neutral facilitator—ready to re-engage should Armenia choose to do so—rather than as a normative actor committed to defending democracy. In this early act, there was no clear villain and no hero—just a stage set with quiet compromises.

This posture extended into the next phase of relations, from the negotiation of the CEPA to the Velvet Revolution. Once again, the EU presented Armenia’s foreign policy choices as freely taken, portraying the CEPA as a sovereign corrective after the failed Association Agreement. But the Velvet Revolution disrupted the narrative. With Nikol Pashinyan’s unexpected rise, the EU discovered a protagonist it could champion. Pashinyan, a former journalist turned opposition leader, came to symbolise the democratic aspirations of a society reclaiming its agency. His imprisonment in April 2018 was met with cautious concern by the EU, but his swift political ascent was embraced with enthusiasm. The revolution offered a rare moment in which Armenia was cast not merely as a partner, but as a democratic hero—a figure inspiring hope for genuine reform in the EU’s eastern neighbourhood. The citizens, too, were elevated in Brussels’ discourse, portrayed as the true authors of a democratic rebirth. For a brief moment, the plot was clear: the people of Armenia had stood up to autocracy, and their new leader embodied that spirit.

Yet the outbreak of the Second Karabakh War in 2020 disrupted this heroic narrative. The EU initially maintained its equidistance, calling for both Armenia and Azerbaijan to end hostilities without taking a firm position on responsibility. The conflict was framed as a bilateral dispute, and Pashinyan—the former democratic hero—was no longer a central figure in EU discourse. As violence escalated and human suffering mounted, the EU remained committed to a language of balance, urging dialogue rather than naming aggressors. Even after Azerbaijan’s military advances, the displacement of Karabakh Armenians, and the blockade of the Lachin Corridor, Baku was not clearly cast as the antagonist. This ambiguity may have been strategic, as the EU sought to deepen its energy partnerships with Azerbaijan following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In this part of the story, the hero was missing, and the villain had yet to be fully revealed.

That villain would emerge more clearly in 2022. Russia’s failure to uphold its role as Armenia’s security guarantor, coupled with its broader war of aggression in Ukraine, reshaped the EU’s understanding of the South Caucasus. In abandoning its peacekeeping responsibilities under the CSTO and refusing to intervene during Azerbaijan’s escalations, Russia effectively betrayed Armenia. This betrayal became a turning point in EU discourse. For the first time, Russia—not Azerbaijan—was framed as the principal threat to Armenia’s security and democratic future. Moscow had not only failed to protect its supposed

ally, but had also actively undermined the regional balance, further eroding its credibility. The EU began to reimagine Armenia's predicament not as a localised ethnic conflict, but as part of a broader contest between autocracy and democracy.

By 2023, this shift had fully taken root. The EU began to make explicit connections between Armenia's security and its democratic development. The deployment of the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA), though modest in scope, marked a symbolic departure from earlier detachment. More significantly, EU officials began framing Azerbaijan's actions as 'hybrid attacks' on Armenia's constitutional order, while openly accusing Russia of betrayal. In this evolving narrative, the villain was now fully embodied by Putin's Russia—a former patron turned predator. Pashinyan, though still present, no longer held the same heroic glow; his democratic credentials were overshadowed by the scale of the crisis and his increasingly difficult position. The hero had become more diffuse—perhaps now located not in any one leader, but in Armenia's continued resilience as a struggling democracy under siege.

This narrative crystallised in late 2023 at a high-level summit between Armenian and EU leaders, joined by U.S. officials. Here, Armenia's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and democratic reforms were explicitly affirmed as interdependent. Commission President von der Leyen praised Armenia's democratic efforts and its cooperation in preventing sanctions circumvention—tying domestic governance to the broader geopolitical contest. The EU was no longer neutral. Armenia was now framed as a frontline state, facing external threats not merely to its borders but to its democratic identity.

Ultimately, the moral of the EU's story in Armenia is one of slow awakening. In the first two acts, the EU declined to play a central role, preferring to remain an observer and a facilitator. It offered choices, not protections. During these years, the hero was left to fend for himself, and the villain remained unspoken. Even the Second Karabakh War did not prompt immediate reevaluation. But the cumulative effects of conflict, displacement, and Russia's duplicity pushed the EU to revise its story. The once-neutral narrator began to choose sides. While EU institutions still move cautiously, a clearer consensus has emerged: Armenia's democratic fate is inseparable from its security, and both are threatened by actors hostile to European values. In this revised plotline, Russia now plays the villain, Armenia is the embattled hero, and the EU—at last—steps closer to being not just a narrator, but a supporting character in the unfolding drama.

Ultimately, the moral of the EU's story in Armenia is one of slow response. During the first two acts of this plot, the EU was reluctant to pick a side and preferred to let Armenia make its own foreign policy choices. In these instances, Armenia was cast as the author of its own destiny, while the EU merely offered opportunities, should Yerevan choose to pursue them. Thus, the EU cannot be said to have drawn substantial lessons from its engagement with Armenia—whether during the 2013 collapse of the Association Agreement, the CEPA negotiations, or even the Velvet Revolution. Not even the Second Karabakh War significantly altered the EU's framing of the story, although its consequences clearly did. While the EU initially clung to a balanced approach, urging both sides to resolve their conflict, the peace imposed by Russia soon revealed itself to be fragile. When Moscow invaded Ukraine and abandoned its peacekeeping role in the South Caucasus, the EU found its villain. And although some EU officials eventually acknowledged the desperate situation Armenia had fallen into, the heroic figure of Pashinyan—once a symbol of democratic renewal—no longer inspired the EU to the same extent. This prevailing narrative was rarely contested within the EU; instead, it gradually metastasised across institutions. Certain actors, particularly in the European Parliament, had more room to speak freely,

call out villains, or act more swiftly—yet by this stage in EU-Armenia relations, most operated according to the same assumptions.

The contestation among and within European actors concerning Ukraine has been shaped by evolving narratives, political discourse, and policy responses, particularly in the wake of the Euromaidan protests and the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion. Applying the four methodological devices - setting, characters, plot, and moral of the story - helps to analyse how these actors have engaged with Ukraine's democratic trajectory and European aspirations. Ukraine is primarily framed as a state in transition towards democracy, struggling to solidify its democratic institutions while facing external aggression and internal political challenges. The Euromaidan protests marked a critical shift, portraying Ukraine as a nation striving for European integration and democratic governance. Following the Russian invasion, the narrative intensified, reinforcing Ukraine's position as a frontline state defending not only its sovereignty but also European values. Within European institutions, Ukraine's struggle is often contextualised within broader geopolitical tensions, the EU's enlargement strategy, and the principles of democracy promotion. However, contestation arises over the degree of conditionality applied to Ukraine's EU accession process, given the ongoing conflict and governance challenges.

The EU and its institutions, including the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Council, are largely positioned as the guardians of democratic values and supporters of Ukraine's European path. Member states, however, exhibit varying levels of commitment, leading to internal contestation over issues such as military aid, sanctions, and the speed of integration. Ukraine's government and civil society emerge as heroes, resisting external aggression and pushing for reforms, but criticisms persist regarding corruption, rule-of-law issues, and oligarchic influence. Russia is unanimously portrayed as the villain, undermining Ukraine's sovereignty and violating international norms. Within the EU, there is also contestation over the role of member states with close ties to Russia, such as Hungary.

The narrative of Ukraine's European integration is shaped by pivotal events, including the Euromaidan protests, the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas, and the 2022 full-scale invasion. These events have driven shifts in European discourse and policy. Initially, EU actors emphasised conditionality, requiring reforms in governance, anti-corruption, and judicial independence. However, the invasion reframed Ukraine's EU aspirations as a geopolitical imperative rather than a purely merit-based process. Contestation emerges over balancing fast-track accession with maintaining democratic standards, particularly regarding concerns over governance reforms. European institutions and member states also debate the effectiveness of sanctions, military support, and financial assistance, with some advocating for more aggressive measures and others prioritising diplomatic solutions.

The moral of the story: The EU's response – imposing sanctions on Russia, providing financial and military aid to Ukraine, and granting Ukraine candidate status – reflects a shift in its approach to democracy support. The large-scale Russian invasion has reinforced the EU's understanding that Ukraine's security, sovereignty, and future are intrinsically linked to Europe's own stability and security.

Overall, there has been minimal contestation between Ukraine's local communities of practice (CoP) and the EU regarding the fundamental understanding of democracy, its values, and the mechanisms of democracy support. While some procedural disagreements have emerged—concerning priorities, target groups, or the sequencing of beneficiaries—these have not challenged the core principles of democracy promotion. Instead, democratic learning, both within the EU and Ukraine's local CoP, has evolved through experience, feedback, and analysis of past democracy support initiatives in Ukraine.

Although some dissenting voices have surfaced, they have remained politically marginal and largely inconsequential. Their critiques did not contribute to refining democracy support policies or improving democratic learning. Instead, they either opposed Ukraine's support altogether or questioned the legitimacy of democracy itself.

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