



## Democracy-Support Innovations in the Eastern Neighbourhood

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## Executive summary

### Key Recommendations

This comparative analysis concludes the InvigoratEU WP4 deliverable by synthesising findings from the accession trio – Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – through the lens of Task 4.1's conceptual framework. Task 4.1 operationalises democratisation as a multi-level interplay of international (e.g., EU conditionality), regional (e.g., Russian hybrid threats), state (e.g., institutional reforms), and societal (e.g., civil society agency) factors, specifically tailored to conflict and post-conflict environments. This approach moves beyond traditional models focused on peaceful transitions, revealing how geopolitical pressures in the Eastern Neighbourhood generate distinctive patterns of democratic resilience. By extracting three novel democratisation models – *securitised hollowing* (Georgia), *hybrid consolidation* (Moldova), and *wartime hybridisation* (Ukraine) – the analysis delivers Objective 4.1 (O4.1): innovative perspectives on democratisation processes amid blockages to democracy, stability, and resilience.

Building on InvigoratEU's innovative democratization models and synthesizing case-specific insights from Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, these recommendations operationalize Task 4.1 for EU policymakers. They address blockages in conflict/post-conflict contexts across the accession trio, prioritizing adaptive resilience while balancing securitization's benefits with pluralism safeguards. Explicit linkages to the three models ensure targeted application, incorporating empirical lessons like Georgia's civil society crackdowns, Moldova's energy diversification, and Ukraine's wartime volunteer audits.

1. The EU should scale targeted funding for civil society as a democratic bulwark, allocating €100M+ annually through flexible instruments like the EED – **directly countering *securitised hollowing* by strengthening the societal counterbalance mechanism**, which theoretically activates when state actors exploit securitisation discourse for executive overreach under hybrid pressures. This funding operationalises the model's non-state resilience vector by sustaining horizontal mobilisation (protests, media ecosystems) that maintains pro-EU majorities (>70 percent) despite institutional erosion, as the pathological dynamic of hollowing risks terminal autocratisation without such autonomous agency. This redirects 30–40 percent of NDICI/EPF budgets to youth-led NGOs, independent media, and watchdog networks, with rapid-grant mechanisms under 90 days for hybrid threat responses such as disinformation audits and legal aid for activists. Drawing from Georgia's case, where EED channels bypassed government funding freezes (€121M), the EU should prioritize independent media survival amid crackdowns; expand to Moldova's civil society energy campaigns and Ukraine's volunteer organizations auditing wartime aid. This funding should be tied to resilience benchmarks like protest turnout (target: 20 percent youth participation) and public trust polls (aim: 70 percent support for the EU), monitored via annual EED reports bypassing autocratic governments. This builds societal ownership, preventing full hollowing as evidenced by Georgia's 80 percent pro-EU sentiment.
2. The EU must implement conflict-sensitive conditionality by embedding resilience benchmarks in Reform/Growth Facilities and **operationalising *hybrid***

**consolidation through equilibrium security–democracy coupling.** Regional low-intensity pressures (frozen conflicts, coercion) are transformed via integrated frameworks that fuse hybrid defence with governance benchmarks, yielding multi-level synergies that incrementally professionalise state institutions while societal co-production avoids zero-sum securitisation traps, achieving steady democratic deepening. Traditional metrics falter in war zones, so 40 percent of funding gates on pluralism indicators (media freedom indices, civil society space scores) alongside hybrid resilience measures (cyber defense drills, energy diversification). The Union should develop an EU-wide "Resilience Matrix" for low-intensity contexts like Moldova's Transnistria (countering vote-buying, gas coercion) and high-intensity like Ukraine's wartime audits, with quarterly reviews incorporating local experts. The Ukraine Facility disbursements should be linked to volunteer network audits and post-war election roadmaps, enforcing Ukraine-specific benchmarks like judicial vetting and anti-corruption (e.g., NABU/SAPO independence).

3. To integrate hybrid threats effectively, the EU should expand EUPM models with mandatory pluralism audits, replicating Moldova's success – **scaling hybrid consolidation tools while preventing securitised hollowing risks.** The Union could deploy missions to Georgia for Abkhazia monitoring, scale Ukraine's assistance with civil society veto rights, and standardize "pluralism clauses" featuring six-month audits (Freedom House/V-Dem) to block media crackdowns. Allocate €200M EPF for trio-wide cyber/media resilience training co-designed with NGOs, incorporating Ukraine's counter-disinformation needs (e.g., telethon reforms) and Moldova's Rapid Alert System enhancements. Balance with Ukraine's martial law derogations by mandating post-war decompression (electoral restoration, minority rights per Rome Statute ratification).
4. Finally, the EU needs to **sustain enlargement momentum through swift, credible negotiations as a geopolitical signal against spoilers.** Prioritize first-cluster openings (fundamentals: rule of law) by Q2 2026, paired with "trio coordination" summits signaling irreversibility. Adopt unified frameworks via QMV pilots bypassing vetoes (e.g., Hungary), with public diplomacy highlighting 74% Ukraine/70% Moldova EU support. Incorporate Ukraine's security pacts (28 bilateral agreements tying aid to reforms) and Georgia's sanctions advocacy (e.g., Human Rights Regime activation). Scale civil society involvement in negotiations, as Ukraine's 292 public reps in 36 groups exemplify, ensuring post-war media pluralism roadmaps.

Additional case-derived actions include: **energy security for Moldova** (diversification grants to counter Russian leverage); **post-war judicial staffing for Ukraine** (TAIEX/Twinning for 22–61% vacancies); **EU-wide sanctions coherence for Georgia** (extending Baltic/US Magnitsky to Union level).

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## About InvigoratEU

InvigoratEU is a Horizon Europe-funded project, coordinated by the EU-Chair at the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) together with the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) in Berlin. The project, with a duration of 3 years from January 2024 until December 2026, examines how the EU can structure its future relations with its Eastern neighbours and the countries of the Western Balkans. The consortium has received around three million euros for this endeavour.

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.18455689](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18455689)

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# 1 Setting the Scene

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## Introduction

Democratic resilience in the Accession Trio countries is increasingly tested amid a turbulent geopolitical environment marked by persistent external aggression and internal political challenges. The accession trio case studies (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) reveal a complex interplay between local democratic dynamics and broader geopolitical pressures, whereby democratic institutions and societal agency must continuously adjust, withstand, and recover in the face of hybrid threats and geopolitical contestation. A crucial dimension of this interaction is the securitization of European Union (EU) policies—where democracy support is not only framed as a normative goal but also securitized as a strategic imperative linked to regional stability and resilience (Bosse, 2025).

In Georgia, this securitization manifests in the EU linking democratic reforms to countering Russian hybrid tactics, underpinning political conditionality with explicit security narratives, while also navigating the risks that securitization may restrict democratic freedoms under the guise of resilience (Georgia Case Study, 2025, p. 19). Moldova illustrates the EU's strategic use of securitization through the integration of democracy support with security sector reform and hybrid threat resilience, particularly via CSDP civilian missions, reflecting a deliberate coupling of governance and security policy (Moldova Case Study, 2025, p. 31). Ukraine's war context has further intensified this trend, with EU democracy assistance deeply embedded in a securitized framework combining military support with democratic reforms, emphasizing that safeguarding democracy is inseparable from national defense (Ukraine Case Study, 2025, p. 39).

This report focuses on how the interaction between democracy and geopolitics shapes the durability and quality of democratic governance. It highlights the fragility of democratic gains under geopolitical strain and the critical role of EU conditionality, civil society support, and security cooperation in fortifying resilience. The evolving geopolitical competition, notably Russia's hybrid and military strategies, underscores the urgency for sustained coordinated EU action that is attuned to each country's unique challenges and adaptive capacities. As observed, democratic resilience is not merely institutional endurance but the capacity of states and societies to navigate an increasingly contested geopolitical landscape while preserving reform momentum and societal trust (Ukraine Case Study, 2025 p. 45).

## Conceptual Framework

This long policy report advances InvigoratEU's Work Package 4 (WP4) by operationalizing Task 4.1's innovative conceptual framework, which redefines democratisation as a multi-level interplay of international, regional, state, and societal factors specifically in conflict and post-conflict contexts. Traditional democratisation models emphasise peaceful institutional transitions through free elections, checks and balances, political pluralism, civil society vibrancy, and human rights protections (Brandt and Tekin, 2024). However, the Eastern Neighbourhood's geopolitical volatility – marked by Russian hybrid threats, frozen conflicts,

and full-scale war – demands novel perspectives that integrate securitisation dynamics, where democracy support becomes a strategic resilience tool.

Our framework, developed under Task 4.1, conceptualises democratisation not as linear progress but as adaptive resilience: the capacity of states and societies to withstand, recover from, and innovate amid crises like territorial occupations (Abkhazia/Transnistria), energy coercion, disinformation campaigns, and military invasions. This multi-level lens examines how EU conditionality (international), regional actors like Russia (geopolitical pressures), domestic institutions (state reforms), and grassroots agency (societal mobilisation) interact, revealing blockages and breakthroughs aligned with Objective 4.1 (O4.1).

The framework structures the report's empirical analysis across Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – the accession trio – yielding **three innovative democratisation models: securitised hollowing** (Georgia), **hybrid consolidation** (Moldova), and **wartime hybridisation** (Ukraine). These models operationalise Task 4.1 insights through practical tools like resilience benchmarks (measuring societal ownership via polls and protests), pluralism safeguards (preventing security pretexts from eroding freedoms), and context-specific hybridisation matrices (tailoring EU instruments to conflict intensity). By framing case studies around a consistent skeleton – EU actions (funding, conditionality, CSDP missions) and geopolitical considerations (Russian interference, hybrid threats) – the report ensures comparability while allowing local expertise to highlight peculiarities, such as Georgia's civil society protests or Ukraine's wartime volunteer audits. This approach demonstrates full WP4 coverage: from theoretical conceptualisation (Task 4.1), through detailed empirical analysis (Deliverables D4.1/D10), to actionable policy recommendations that equip the EU for resilient enlargement in contested spaces.

**Securitised Hollowing** describes a democratisation dynamic where securitisation discourse – framing democracy as a security imperative – paradoxically enables institutional erosion under prolonged hybrid pressure. At the international level, robust conditionality (e.g., reform-tied aid suspensions, candidate status freezes) signals normative commitment but proves insufficient against entrenched regional threats like territorial incursions, proxy militias, and sustained disinformation ecosystems that amplify existential vulnerabilities. State actors exploit this securitised atmosphere, deploying "national security" rhetoric to justify executive overreach, media restrictions, judicial capture, and civil society stigmatisation – hollowing core democratic attributes (pluralism, accountability) while maintaining superficial EU alignment. Task 4.1 posits a *societal counterbalance mechanism* as the critical innovation: autonomous non-state agency – manifesting through transnational youth networks, independent media ecosystems, and public opinion majorities – emerges as the primary resilience vector. This mechanism sustains normative democratic commitments (e.g., pro-integration majorities >70%) through horizontal mobilisation, preventing terminal autocratisation by creating parallel accountability structures when vertical state institutions fail. Empirically testable via resilience benchmarks (protest density, trust differentials), it reveals democratisation's non-linear, layered nature in asymmetric conflict zones.

**Hybrid Consolidation** conceptualises gradual democratic deepening through the fusion of security and normative instruments in protracted low-intensity conflicts, achieving equilibrium where securitisation reinforces rather than undermines pluralism. Regional pressures – frozen territorial disputes, economic weaponisation (e.g., resource dependencies), and

covert political interference – generate chronic instability, yet international actors operationalise these via integrated frameworks: hybrid defence missions (cyber resilience, border stabilisation) embed governance benchmarks (anti-corruption indices, judicial vetting) within unified conditionalities. This yields multi-level synergies: state institutions incrementally professionalise through capacity-building (e.g., transparent security sector reforms), while societal actors co-produce resilience via grassroots counter-narratives and community vigilance networks. Task 4.1's core innovation lies in its *equilibrium consolidation logic*, avoiding securitisation's zero-sum pathology (security gains at democracy's expense) through calibrated pluralism safeguards – mandatory civil society consultations in mission design, independent oversight of emergency powers. Measurable via ascending democracy scores and hybrid threat mitigation indices, this model demonstrates how protracted conflict can catalytically deepen democratisation when international leverage transforms regional vulnerabilities into institutional strengthening opportunities.

**Wartime Hybridisation** theorises accelerated, adaptive democratisation under existential high-intensity conflict, where securitisation reaches its zenith yet catalyses hybrid governance structures blending coercion with innovation. Acute regional aggression – full-scale military invasion, infrastructure devastation – suspends procedural democracy (elections, assemblies) under martial frameworks, concentrating international aid (reconstruction loans, military packages) through streamlined conditionality. Task 4.1 frames this as *pluralism under duress*, shifting metrics from outputs (e.g., passed laws) to resilience capacities: emergent bottom-up ecosystems (volunteer aid auditors, digital transparency platforms) embed accountability within top-down flows, sustaining reform continuity amid institutional voids. The innovation resides in *decompression pathways*: post-acute safeguards (phased electoral restoration, pluralism audits) prevent reversion to patronage systems once security imperatives recede. This model's theoretical contribution lies in reconceptualising wartime democratisation as "hybridisation" – not aberration but intensified multi-level interplay where societal cohesion becomes the anchor, international resources the accelerator, and state adaptation the variable. Resilience benchmarks track this via wartime trust metrics, aid absorption efficiency, and post-conflict transition readiness.

## Methodology

This long policy report builds upon three case studies (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) selected due to their enlargement perspectives and status as the 'accession trio' – albeit Georgia's candidate status has since been frozen. With enlargement widely regarded as the EU's most powerful geopolitical instrument, the cases of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine highlight the EU's best practices and lessons learned in promoting democracy when it wields the greatest leverage. The three countries also share similar external challenges in terms of external interference from Russia ranging from full-fledged war to hybrid threats and disinformation.

To ensure consistency among the case studies, authors were provided with a skeleton outline that served as a common reference point. The skeleton, developed by InvigoratEU's partners Carnegie Europe Foundation and Maastricht University, was structured around two key sections: (i) EU action and (ii) geopolitical factors and considerations. EU action encompassed democracy-related EU policies, fundings, and conditionality – including lack

thereof. In this section, authors were also encouraged to assess security strategies that could impact democratic progress in their respective countries. The second component, geopolitical factors and considerations, included the EU's shift from democracy concerns to security priorities as well as the role of external actors such as Russia and China in hindering democratic progress.

Notably, each case study was authored by a local expert, building on extensive desk research, first-hand experience, and deep knowledge of their country's dynamics. While certain common guidelines were provided—such as encouraging authors to focus on the period 2010–2025—they were also free to explore topics of particular relevance within their local context. Beyond the enlargement perspective and the presence of a common external threat, each of these three cases presents individual peculiarities. For instance, in Georgia, financial support for CSOs is a fundamental issue among a wider political crackdown on civil society and independent media; this does not feature as prominently in Ukraine and Moldova. Similarly, the imposition of martial law following Russia's invasion inevitably hampers the functioning of core democratic processes in Ukraine, including elections.

## Where Do We Stand?

The Accession Trio countries exhibit divergent democratic trajectories underscored by complex interactions between domestic reforms, societal attitudes, and external geopolitical factors.

Georgia's democracy has experienced a marked decline in recent years. The report highlights that "Georgia's democratic backsliding, which began visibly after 2019, has caused its annual democracy scores to decrease from 64 in 2018 to 58 in 2024" according to Freedom House (Freedom House, 2018a; 2024a; Georgia Case Study, 2025, p. 23). This deterioration reflects diminishing political pluralism, curtailments on civil society, and suppression of critical media. Local actors underscore that "democratic backsliding did not happen overnight," and pinpoint the "slowdown of reforms and increased Russian influence" as interlinked drivers undermining democratic quality (Georgia Case Study, 2025, p. 23). Although public and youth pro-European sentiments remain strong, the report stresses that political will for reform remains fragile in the face of autocratic tendencies and external geopolitical pressures (Georgia Case Study, 2025, p. 21). The weakening of Georgian democratic institutions amid ongoing Russian hybrid threats leaves the country's democratic future uncertain and increasingly dependent on a sustained, albeit more assertive, EU engagement.

Moldova presents a more optimistic picture of democratic consolidation bolstered by reform progress. Freedom House data indicate Moldova's democracy score improved modestly from 57 in 2018 to 64 in 2024, reflecting strengthened institutions and governance despite ongoing challenges (Freedom House, 2018b; 2024b). The report confirms that Moldova has made considerable progress, especially in anti-corruption, judicial reform, and energy security, despite external pressures from Russia and internal political challenges (Moldova Case Study, 2025, p. 33). This progress is reflected in sizable public support for EU integration, with over 70% of Moldovans favoring accession (Freedom House, 2024b).

The integration of security and democracy support, including the civilian CSDP mission and hybrid threat countermeasures, further consolidates Moldova's democratic resilience. The report underscores that "the legitimacy of Moldova's democratic institutions is steadily strengthening" owing to internal reform efforts complemented by robust EU assistance, which is essential to counterbalance external destabilization tactics (ibid).

Ukraine's democratic evolution unfolds amid the extraordinary context of active military conflict yet demonstrates remarkable societal cohesion around democratic values and EU integration. Ukraine's democracy scores have improved moderately, with Freedom House scores rising from 59.9 in 2018 to 61.2 in 2025, highlighting progress while acknowledging challenges (Freedom House, 2018c; 2024c). Public commitment to European integration is overwhelming, with recent polls indicating that "74% of Ukrainians support accession to the EU," a unifying theme amid adversity (Transparency International Ukraine, 2025). Democratic resilience is seen as integral to national survival: the wartime context has galvanized Ukrainian civil society and reinforced commitments to democratic reforms (Ukraine Case Study, 2025, p. 53). While martially imposed restrictions and military exigencies present governance challenges, the report emphasizes increasing institutional trust and reform progress in judicial independence and anti-corruption pillars that underpin democratic sustainability in a highly volatile environment.

Together, these cases illustrate that democratic resilience in the Accession Trio countries is a complex, dynamic product of local reform efforts, popular commitment to European integration, and the capacity to withstand persistent geopolitical pressures. The case studies advocate for continued tailored EU engagement combining political support, financial assistance, and security cooperation adapted to the specific needs and challenges in each country to preserve and strengthen fragile democracies.

## EU Action in the Three Countries: Funding, Policies, and Support Strategies

Georgia, together with Moldova and Ukraine, has always expressed the political will and readiness to integrate into the EU. These political pledges were particularly strengthened in 2017, when the three countries, having signed the Association Agreement with the EU, also achieved visa-free travel in the Schengen Zone. Despite the three countries' efforts to urge the EU to offer more beyond the association framework, the Union refrained from offering a political upgrade to its Eastern Neighbours. This reluctance stemmed from its own challenges linked to Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and public discontent about enlargement in a number of EU member states.

To respond to the limbo and tighten political pressure, the three countries - Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine - established the "Association Trio" to increase agency and cooperation on their EU enlargement path (Delcour and Panchulidze, 2023). However, this did not result in the same level of commitment or new programmatic and financial engagement from the Union. The Association Trio countries could only advance their EU engagement in 2022, when Russia launched its brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with severe security, political, and economic implications for Ukraine and the countries in the neighbourhood (ibid). With

the granting of the candidate status, in 2024, the EU has also expanded its approach, providing extensive financial support, launching structured dialogues based on tailored recommendations, deploying Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, and supporting civil society organizations.

Georgia's authoritarian turn, with the Georgian Dream's government cracking down on civil society and independent media, prompted the EU to freeze the country's candidate status. The EU's democracy support for Georgia is implemented through a portfolio of financial instruments designed to stabilize democratic institutions, fortify resilience, and enhance regional security. Notably, after suspending direct institutional funding in mid-2024, the EU redirected its financial support exclusively to strengthen independent media and civil society networks, channelling assistance primarily through the European Endowment for Democracy (EED).

In terms of conditionality, the Baltic countries (Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia) imposed sanctions on Bidzina Ivanishvili and high officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia for their violent crackdown on democratic protests in the country. Despite widespread calls for the adoption of EU-wide punitive measures, the Union only managed to agree on halting visa liberalization for holders of diplomatic passports, while failing to activate its Human Rights Sanctions Regime towards Georgian political leaders (Georgia Case Study, 2025, p. 25). Georgia's EU strategy remains tightly linked to political conditionality: failure to deliver on the EU's twelve reform priorities resulted in a funding freeze of approximately €121 million in 2024.

Moldova has witnessed one of the EU's most substantial and strategically nuanced engagements since 2020. The EU mobilized more than €2.2 billion in comprehensive support from 2021 through 2025, centered on the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). This support was reinforced by dedicated grants and sectoral programs emphasizing governance, rule of law, energy security, and anti-corruption (Moldova Case Study, 2025, p. 32). Moldova's strategic shift to securitizing democracy support is epitomized by the deployment of a civilian CSPD mission and the provision of approximately €47 million in EPF funding since 2021. Moldova's broader EU strategy also deploys energy diversification initiatives and fosters civil society capacity to enhance resilience to external pressures (Moldova Case Study, 2025, p. 33).

Since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukraine has become the centerpiece of the EU's external democracy, security, and enlargement policy. The Ukraine Facility Plan—established in early 2024 allocates €50 billion through 2027. By combining grants, loans, and guarantees, it aims to underpin Ukraine's political stability, reconstruction, military resilience, and institutional reforms. Beyond financial support, the EU channels aid to civil society and governance through the EED, Horizon Europe cooperation, and extensive technical programs. The unique wartime context fosters a synthesis of democratization and defense (Ukraine Case Study, 2025, p. 58).

Across these countries, the EU's approach hinges on a calibrated blend of assistance, political conditionality, and punitive mechanisms. Since 2020, conditionality has led to

concrete measures such as suspending funds to the Georgian government over stalled reforms, targeted sanctions in Moldova, and contingent aid withdrawals in Ukraine tied to reform benchmarks. The EU's Human Rights Sanctions Regime has progressively been employed to address violations undermining democratic norms and sovereignty – although it has not yet been applied to Georgian officials for their roles in the violent crackdown against civil society. Integrating political reform with security imperatives, the EU's deployment of the EPF signals an acknowledgment that democracy support in this region is inseparable from broader efforts to enhance resilience against hybrid and military threats, vital to regional stability.

## Geopolitical Factors and Considerations

The geopolitical context constitutes a defining and complex dimension for the democratic and EU integration processes across Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The case studies emphasize the overwhelming impact of Russian aggression and hybrid warfare strategies aimed at destabilizing these countries and undermining their democratic consolidation. As documented in the Georgia case study, Georgia's democratization process and its alignment with the EU have been continuously challenged by Russia through military, political, and economic means, backed by multifaceted disinformation campaigns (Georgia Case Study, 2025, p. 26). Russia's 2008 military intervention and continuing occupation of Georgian territories persist as a regional security threat, while the domestic political landscape increasingly reflects the tensions of navigating between European integration aspirations and Russian pressure. The case studies assert that the ongoing hybrid warfare, including attempts to weaken civil society and independent media, situates Georgia at the epicenter of geopolitical contestation in the region (Invigorate Georgia Case Study, 2025, p. 29).

In Moldova, the geopolitical stakes are similarly critical, intensified by the presence of a frozen conflict in Transnistria and Russia's broader neo-imperial ambitions. The case study analysis underlines that Moldova has become a frontline state in the geopolitical struggle between the EU and Russia, as Moscow continues to deploy hybrid tactics, including disinformation, economic coercion, and political proxies, seeking to derail Moldova's democratic reforms (Moldova Case Study, 2025, p. 36). Notably, Moldova is the first EaP country to sign a dedicated EU Security and Defense Partnership. These security and defense partnerships are closely related to democratization, as they often include governance-related conditionalities, capacity-building for transparent and accountable security institutions, and support for democratic reforms. Additionally, by reducing external security pressures and strengthening institutional resilience, such partnerships create more stable conditions for democratic processes to function and deepen. The civilian EU CSDP mission (EUPM Moldova) is emblematic of this approach, focusing on strengthening institutional resilience to hybrid threats and supporting governance reforms vital to Moldova's euro-integration trajectory (Moldova Case Study, 2025, p. 33).

The Ukraine case study vividly portrays the war as both the gravest geopolitical challenge and a transformative factor accelerating democratic reforms and EU integration. Ukraine's geopolitical significance is amplified by the broader confrontation between democratic and authoritarian forces on a global scale, as the case study underlines, Ukraine stands at

the crossroads of international power struggles, where the preservation and advancement of democracy serve as both a national imperative and a linchpin of European security (Ukraine Case Study, 2025, p. 60). The war has precipitated important shifts in EU foreign and enlargement policies, underscoring that future enlargement, especially in the East, will increasingly be conditioned by geopolitical factors, balancing democracy promotion with security imperatives (Ukraine Case Study, 2025, p. 59-60).

The case studies underscore that democratic resilience in these countries is intimately linked to geopolitical dynamics encompassing regional security threats, external hybrid interference, and the global contestation of values. The authors urge the EU to adopt a more geopolitical, strategic foreign policy posture, combining normative democracy support with robust security and resilience measures to sustain democratic processes amid geopolitical turbulence (Georgia Case Study, 2025, p. 19; Moldova Case Study, 2025, p. 38; Ukraine Case Study, 2025, p. 59). The evolving geopolitical rivalry effectively transforms EU enlargement and democracy support into instruments of broader strategic competition, where Brussels must balance the consolidation of democratic governance with the imperative to counter authoritarian encroachment (Ukraine Case Study, 2025, p. 59-60).

### Interactions between Democracy and Geopolitics

The process of democratic resilience in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine cannot be understood without appreciating the complex interplay between democracy support and geopolitical contestation, particularly as framed through EU policy approaches. The case studies highlight that the EU has come to securitize its democracy support strategies, tightly linking democratic consolidation to broader regional security imperatives.

In all three countries, the EU frames democratic governance as not only a normative goal but also as an essential element of resilience against external threats, especially Russian hybrid warfare, disinformation, and military aggression. In Georgia, the EU discourse situates democracy support within a security-resilience paradigm, aiming to counteract Russian interference through governance reform and civil society strengthening, while also maintaining political conditionality to pressure stalled reforms (Georgia Case Study, 2025, p. 19). Yet, this securitizing logic also risks constraining democratic freedoms when security concerns justify limitations on political pluralism or civil liberties.

Moldova embodies the EU's securitization of democracy policy with the introduction of civilian CSDP missions and targeted financial assistance designed explicitly to build resilience against hybrid threats. The EU's narrative in Moldova intertwines democratization closely with security sector reforms, cyber defense, and counter-disinformation measures (Moldova Case Study, 2025, p. 35). However, the case studies point to an inherent tension within this approach: securitizing democracy reinforces state resilience but can lead to overemphasizing security at the expense of inclusive political participation and the safeguarding of democratic rights.

Ukraine offers the most acute instance of securitization, where EU democracy promotion is enmeshed with a wartime security context. The country's significant EU financial and military aid packages are part of a broader securitized strategy that blends defense assistance

with support for judicial reforms, anti-corruption efforts, and civil society (Ukraine Case Study, 2025, p. 59). The war intensifies the securitization dynamic by justifying extraordinary policy measures and martial law restrictions in the name of national survival, complicating the balance between security and democratic freedoms. Understanding the EU's securitization of democracy support reveals both strategic coherence and normative challenges. On one hand, securitization enables the EU to mobilize critical resources and political leverage necessary to confront existential threats in the region. On the other hand, the process risks "entrenching autocratic practices, weakening democratic institutions, and marginalizing civil society" if security frameworks overshadow democratic norms and rights.

The case studies emphasize the necessity for the EU to maintain a delicate balance—mobilizing security-focused support while vigilantly protecting democratic principles and fostering broad-based societal resilience. Overall, the interaction between democracy and geopolitics within the European neighbourhood is increasingly shaped by securitized policies that underscore democracy as a security asset. The enduring challenge lies in ensuring that such securitization works not against but alongside genuine democratic resilience, enabling these countries to withstand geopolitical pressures without sacrificing their democratic foundations.

## 2 Georgia Case Study

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### Introduction

Over the last three decades, relations between the EU and Georgia have developed within a number of cooperation formats and evolved gradually, resulting in Georgia's significant alignment with the EU's institutional framework. Despite Georgia's political will for EU accession, which had been unwavering until recently, the EU was not ready to offer a membership perspective to the Eastern Neighbourhood countries. Only Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine in 2022 and its geopolitical implications made it possible for Georgia to officially apply for EU membership.

Georgia's democratisation process and its alignment with the EU have been continuously challenged by Russia through military, political, and economic means, backed by multifaceted disinformation campaigns. Yet, the country has never witnessed its authorities turning back from the country's European integration process and openly attacking the EU for meddling in Georgia's domestic politics, the ruling authorities announced that EU accession was off the table and have since passed a series of repressive laws that are closing democratic space in the country thwarted its democratic reform agenda and effectively stalled its EU accession process. While Georgia's public and civil society have emerged as its source of democratic resilience, the ongoing autocratisation and formal disengagement with the EU will be costly for the country, especially amid overarching geopolitical reordering in the wake of Russia's war in Ukraine (Panchulidze and Youngs, 2025).

This chapter operationalises the conceptual framework developed under InvigoratEU Task 4.1, which reconceptualises democratisation not as a linear process of institutional consolidation but as a contested, multi-level interaction across international, regional, state, and societal arenas. Rather than treating democratic change as an internally driven sequence of reforms, the framework foregrounds how democratisation in protracted conflict and post-conflict settings is shaped simultaneously by EU conditionality and normative leverage at the international level; by regional security pressures, most notably Russian hybrid aggression and territorial occupation; by domestic political and institutional dynamics; and by societal mobilisation and civil society agency. The analysis focuses on the period from 2014 to 2025, spanning Georgia's Association Agreement implementation and the post-2022 shift in the EU's enlargement policy.

Georgia constitutes an emblematic case of what this chapter conceptualises as securitised hollowing: a pathological dynamic in which the securitisation of democracy support, framing democratic governance primarily as a component of resilience against external threats, unintentionally facilitates the erosion of core democratic standards. EU democracy support has increasingly been articulated in security terms, linked to Georgia's unresolved territorial conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, territories internationally recognised as part of Georgia and under Russian occupation (approximately 20 per cent of the territory), persistent disinformation campaigns, and the presence of pro-Russian elite networks. While such framing aims to strengthen democratic resilience, it has also enabled governing elites to

invoke security imperatives to justify restrictions on political pluralism, media freedom, and civic space. Measures such as the adoption of “foreign agents” legislation, pressure on independent media, and the violent repression of protests have been presented domestically as necessary responses to external threats.

At the international level, the EU has sought to signal resolve through sharpened conditionality, including the suspension of €121 million in financial assistance linked to the non-fulfilment of the twelve reform priorities, and the withholding of candidate status. Yet these instruments operate within a regional environment characterised by sustained Russian hybrid pressure, which amplifies securitisation narratives and constrains the EU’s leverage. The result has been a measurable deterioration of democratic quality, reflected in Georgia’s Freedom House score declining from 64 in 2018 to 58 in 2024.

At the same time, the theoretical framework highlights a critical countervailing dynamic: the role of societal agency as a stabilising force in contexts of institutional hollowing. In Georgia, sustained civil society mobilisation, including youth-led protests, independent watchdog organisations, and EU-supported civil networks, has functioned as a de facto firewall against full authoritarian regression. With public support for EU integration remaining consistently high at around 80 per cent, societal actors have preserved spaces of accountability and contestation even as state institutions have weakened.

## Evolution of EU’s democracy support in Georgia

The EU began deepening its cooperation with Georgia as part of the ENP, which was not designed to offer a pathway to EU membership to its partners. Yet, some Eastern Neighbourhood countries have perceived it as a political opportunity to engage in democratic reforms and through deepening political relations with the EU to officially gain an accession perspective. In the wake of the 2003 revolution, Georgia openly declared European and Euro-Atlantic integration as its foreign policy priority and began investing in a democratic reform agenda, strengthening democratic institutions. The EU has been one of the key supporters of Georgia’s democratisation agenda. As part of the EU’s efforts to respond to fast-changing developments in its neighbourhood and develop new tools for ensuring democracy and stability, since mid-2000s, it designed new financial instruments and programmes to ensure better political differentiation between its partners and more tailored democracy support policies (Korosteleva, Natorski and Simão, 2014).

This resulted in the inception of more targeted regional EaP initiative covering Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. With the aim of fostering political and economic ties between the EU and the partner countries, Georgia benefited from enhanced technical support and financial assistance to ensure policy alignment with the EU. Governance and democracy was one among the four key areas of cooperation (Korosteleva, 2011).

The initiative played a significant role in Georgia’s democratisation process through financial and technical assistance to implement institutional reforms including in public administration, judicial independence, and anti-corruption efforts. This created a strong basis for the EU to advance its partnerships with Georgia and sign the Association Agreement (AA) and its accompanying Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in 2014. Through

these agreements Georgia committed to ensure implementation of the democratic reform agenda to improve governance, rule of law, and human rights conditions in country and align with the EU's institutional framework.

The main financial instrument under which Georgia receives assistance from the EU is the NDICI. The EU is Georgia's largest donor, and it provides support to the country through geographic instruments, thematic programmes, grants, and loans (European Commission, 2022). Under the 2007-2013 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), Georgia received €452 million in assistance, with a priority on fostering democratic governance and the rule of law. The EU's support for Georgia has also been increasing over the years. For instance, within the 2014-2020 MFF, the EU's financial assistance amounted to €819.2 million (Tolordava, 2022).

In line with its support for democratic governance, Georgia also received macro-financial assistance from the EU to support sector-specific reforms. In 2009-2010, the EU pledged €46 million in MFA to Georgia in the form of grants and loans to boost the country's economic reforms. In 2015-2017, the EU implemented a second MFA of €46 million to support economic development, with another €46 million approved in 2018 for economic stabilisation and structural reforms (European Commission, 2018). Georgia also received substantial support from the EU as part of the recovery fund from the Covid-19 pandemic. The Union proposed an MFA loan package of €150 million for Georgia; however, the country only benefited from the first instalment of €75 million in 2020 (European Commission, n.d.). The authorities refrained from requesting the second instalment due to the non-fulfilment of conditions linked to judicial system reform.

#### From 'Association Trio' to the Enlargement Framework

Georgia, together with Moldova and Ukraine, has always expressed the political will and readiness to integrate into the EU. These political pledges were particularly strengthened in 2017, when the three countries, having signed the Association Agreement with the EU, also achieved visa-free travel in the Schengen Zone. Despite the three countries' efforts to urge the EU to offer more beyond the association framework, the Union refrained from offering a political upgrade to its Eastern Neighbours. This reluctance stemmed from its own challenges linked to Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, and general public discontent about enlargement in a number of EU member states.

To respond to the limbo and tighten political pressure, the three countries - Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine - established the "Association Trio" to increase agency and cooperation on their EU enlargement path (Delcour and Panchulidze, 2023). However, this did not result in the same level of commitment or new programmatic or financial engagement from the EU. The Association Trio countries could only advance their engagement with the EU in 2022, when Russia launched its brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with severe security, political, and economic implications for Ukraine and the countries in the neighbourhood (ibid). While Georgian authorities did not seem willing to respond to Ukraine's official request for EU membership, thousands of Georgians mobilised in Tbilisi to demand their authorities make an official bid for EU membership.

Despite the official request for membership submitted in early March 2022, the ruling GD authorities continued to limit political space in the country through verbal and physical attacks against opposition politicians, civil society, and critical media (Personal Interview, 2024). This resulted in the EU's delay in offering the candidate status to Georgia, while Ukraine and Moldova received it in June 2022. The EU commission outlined 12 priorities for the government to condition the receipt of the candidate status. Yet, the situation and commitment towards the democratic reform agenda has not improved in the country. On the contrary, the ruling GD upscaled its hostile rhetoric against the EU and its other Western partners and amplified the narratives according to which the West was willing to draw Georgia in the war against Russia and they were punishing Georgia's authorities for not participating in the war (Ibid).

In what analysts have labelled as a geopolitical move, the EU provided candidate status to Georgia in late 2023 and outlined nine further priorities, based on original 12, for the country to fulfil to open accession negotiations (Bosse, 2024). Yet, the Georgian authorities did not seem willing to commit to the reform agenda and, in early 2024, announced that they would adopt the law on Transparency for Foreign Influence, which had been defeated by local and international outcry in 2023. Despite the fact that the functioning of civil society and independent media had been within the priorities outlined by the Commission, and despite international pressure not to adopt such legislation, the ruling authorities proceeded with passing the law. This left Georgia with a de facto halt to the accession process (Parulava, 2024a). By holding elections with numerous irregularities in 2024, the ruling GD also dismissed criticism from the EU and announced that it would not discuss the issue of opening accession negotiations until 2028 (Parulava, 2024b). This effectively resulted in the political death of the Association Trio, amid the Georgian authorities' lack of political will and commitment to meet the democratic criteria needed to advance on the EU membership path.

#### EU's support for civil society in Georgia

In addition to the geographical instruments and the MFA, the EU also provides financial support to Georgia under the Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). The main objective of this instrument is to foster democracy, ensure the protection of human rights, and uphold the rule of law. In line with the thematic instrument supporting democracy, in 2013, the EU and its member states established the EED.

The EED receives funding from the European Commission and 24 EU member states. In many partner countries, including Georgia, it has become the major instrument for providing unconventional funding beyond formalised civil society organisations (Personal Interview, 2024). It has been targeted by the Georgian authorities for allegedly funding "extremist organisations" mostly due to its support for emerging civic movements and activists. These movements have become very popular over the last decades in Georgia, driving mass public mobilisation and resulting in major youth-led protests in support of Georgia's EU integration, opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and in demand of public democratic oversight in Georgia (Civil Georgia, 2024).

The EU has always placed special emphasis on supporting civil society and ensuring an inclusive process within the country, providing space for civil society to contribute to the democratic reform agenda and monitor the implementation of reforms. Yet, the financial support the EU has provided to civil society has been insignificant compared to the funding allocated to other sectors or government agencies for institutional strengthening. In 2024, in response to the Georgian authorities' hostile rhetoric against the EU and its funding, which was portrayed as undermining the country's interests, the EU publicised the specific amounts it had provided to the government and civil society. According to official figures, between 2019 and 2024, the government received 11 times more support than the Georgian civil society sector. The EU provided a total of €46.1 million to civil society and financed 170 civil society organisations across Georgia to implement 47 projects.

Throughout the last five years, the EU has spent 8.6 million euros to support human rights and gender equality and 8 million euros to support democratic engagement and independent media in Georgia. The research also explored how civil society organisations and democracy activists perceived this financial support. Our interlocutors noted that these years were particularly challenging for their operations, given the worsening democratic backsliding and increasing attacks on critical media and civil society organisations. They noted that political conditions made their functioning focus more on survival, and, in line with the declining economic situation and rising prices, made the functioning of civil society particularly challenging (Personal Interview, 2024).

The EU also provides support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity through the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) launched in the wake of the 2008 war, Facility amounting to €12.75 million to support Georgia's resilience in defence sector.

#### Pre-Empting the EU's Democratic Conditionality

Over the last couple of years, Georgia has witnessed democratic backsliding, and the country's political pluralism and public oversight over politics have suffered significantly (Personal Interview, 2024). This has also caused Georgia's annual democracy scores to decrease gradually. For instance, in 2018, Georgia's Freedom House score was 64 out of 100, but it has gradually declined since then and currently stands at 58 (Freedom House, 2018a). Increasing pressure on opposition and critical media, coupled with government-imposed restrictions on civil society through the adoption of the law on "Transparency of Foreign Influence," the ruling authorities' disproportionate response to mass public protests, and continuous illegal detention of those exercising their right of freedom of expression constitute the main reasons behind the declining scores (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Score	64	63	61	60	58	58	58

Table 1 Freedom In the World scores of Georgia 2018-2024

Georgian civil society representatives argue that democratic backsliding did not happen overnight. They criticize the EU and its member states for responding sluggishly to the

gradual erosion of democracy since 2019, which coincided with increased Russian presence in the country. As one civil society representative noted: “this is when we started to protest GD’s attempts towards autocratization and the increased Russian presence in the country. GD did test the public response to their political lies, and failing to pass constitutional reform in 2019 was one of the major turning points (Euronews, 2019). We did not manage to protect our country’s democracy as GD knew they could do more to undermine democratic institutions” (Personal Interview, October 4, 2024).

Over these years, the EU relied on statements of concerns, condemning the anti-democratic moves of the Georgian authorities, but cooperation with the ruling GD did not experience a dramatic change, even in response to the authorities’ increasingly anti-EU narratives and attacks on the EU Delegation and diplomatic missions of EU member states in the country (Civil Georgia, 2021; Gabrichidze, 2022). The Georgian authorities appeared to be a step ahead of the EU. In 2021, it was expected that the EU would use its democratic conditionality against the worsening political situation, in particular the stalled judicial reform and GD’s lack of commitment towards the EU-brokered April 19 deal. To pre-empt the conditionality<sup>1</sup> discourse in the country, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced that the country would refuse the EU loan of €75 million (Herszenhorn, 2021).

It was almost a “dépà-vu” for the Georgian public when, in November 2024, the new Prime Minister, Kobakhidze, announced that they would freeze the issue of opening accession negotiations with the EU until 2028 (Parulava, 2024b). This came as the European Council was expected to announce its decision regarding the opening of the accession talks in the wake of the 2024 parliamentary elections, which were widely contested by the Georgian public and the international community, and GD’s second attempt to silence critical media and civil society in the country through the adoption and enforcement of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence (European Parliament, 2024; Gavin and Parulava, 2024). These dramatic political developments occurred despite political messages and warnings from Brussels that such steps would lead to the erosion of values and democratic norms outlined in the EU Commission’s priorities, which Georgia needs to fulfil in order to open accession talks, as its peers Ukraine and Moldova did in 2023 (Gray and Light, 2024).

The EU’s response to the widely perceived rigged elections was “too little and too late” (Personal Interview, 2024). Despite the fact that the EU’s top diplomat referred to Georgia’s elections as “neither free nor fair,” Georgian civil society considers that the EU has been late in not recognising the results of elections and in calling on the authorities to investigate the irregularities (European External Action Service, 2024). The data collected by local watchdogs and media outlets suggests the authorities planned and executed manipulations before and during election day to influence the results (International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, 2024). In December 2024, former High Representative Josep Borrell announced that the EU would freeze €121 million in funding to the Georgian authorities and use this to bolster its support to civil society (Gavin, 2024a). We inquired

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<sup>1</sup> The 19 April EU-brokered agreement was a deal between Georgia’s government and opposition mediated by European Council President Charles Michel to end a months-long political crisis. See;

regarding the increased funding opportunities, but our interlocutors referred to both limited political and financial support from the EU (Personal Interview, 2024).

In 2025, the Georgian authorities further accelerated autocratisation and passed laws to suppress public resistance. Increasing fines for protesters, easing procedures for firing civil servants are few among many others that the Georgian Dream officials announce to offer including criminalisation of “treason” (OC Media, 2025).

Several EU member states including Sweden, Germany, and France, announced that they would stop their development and cooperation funding to Georgian authorities as a result of stalled accession process with the EU and democratic backsliding in the country. These funds were expected to be redirected to support Georgian civil society and critical media, yet local organisations did not receive information about new funding opportunities or programmes of support (Parulava, 2024c). The Baltic countries, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia, imposed sanctions on Bidzina Ivanishvili and high officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia for their violent crackdown on democratic protests in the country (Civil Georgia, 2024).

Georgians ask for more engagement and support from the EU and its member states as the candidate country slips from the democratic reform path. Yet, the EU has struggled to provide a coherent response. It did announce a cut in financial assistance or a freeze of €121 million to the authorities responsible for democratic backsliding but has offered very little in terms of punitive measures and only managed to agree on halting visa liberalisation for holders of diplomatic passports (Council of the European Union, 2025). While some EP delegations visited Georgia, there was no single high-level visit to the country. Indeed, when EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos planned her visit to the Caucasus, Georgia was not included in the trip. Unlike the US, which included high-level Georgian officials in its Global Magnitsky Sanctions Program, the EU has not imposed sanctions under its Human Rights Sanctions Regime (US Department of State, 2024).

## Geopolitics and reordering: what’s in for Georgia?

The EU discourses are quite significant in Georgia, as interviewees stressed: “Georgia’s democratisation process is directly linked to its relations with the EU and democratic reform agenda, which is shaped under the framework of EU-Georgia relations” (Personal Interview, October 4, 2024). While Georgia does not have a long history of democratic culture, the EU’s democratic conditionality together with the oversight of Georgian civil society represents a rather significant factor driving Georgia’s democratisation agenda. Yet, narratives on the EU are not uniform. Georgian civil society and citizens are particularly pro-European and consider the EU integration agenda crucial for Georgia’s democracy, while the current authorities are driving a major shift in Georgia’s foreign policy and openly attack EU, in parallel with deepening autocratisation (ibid).

Over the last decade as the EU deepened its economic, security, and political relations with Georgia and the wider Eastern Neighbourhood, Russia also intensified its engagement, mainly through its hybrid warfare tactics. This has posed a significant threat to Georgia, particularly in the wake of Russia’s 2008 war against Georgia and the ongoing occupation

of its territories, Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. To date, Georgia's authorities have managed to navigate the pressure coming from Russia while deepening their relations with European and Euro-Atlantic structures, but the ruling GD authorities have changed the long-established foreign policy course of the country (Personal Interview, December 2024). They have gradually softened their criticism of Russia at international platforms, blamed NATO for Russia's war in Ukraine, and responded with ambivalence to the invasion (Gavin, 2024b).

While one would expect Georgia to use the war in Ukraine as a platform for amplifying its security vulnerabilities and attempting to request security guarantees from Western partners, the Georgian ruling party has taken a back seat on political and diplomatic fronts. Over the years, the EU has been an unwavering supporter of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. It launched its monitoring mission and appointed the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia in the wake of Russia's war in Georgia and, from 2021 to 2023, the EU mobilised €63 million to strengthen the Georgian Defence Force's medical, engineering, logistics, and cyber-defence capabilities under the EPF (European External Action Service, 2024b). Yet, in response to the adoption of the so-called "foreign agents" law and the crackdown on protesters the EU suspended €30 million in funding to Georgia (OC Media, 2024).

In a striking turn against its over three decades of aspirations for European integration, Georgia is facing dramatic democratic erosion and what analysts label as fast-paced autocratisation (Khuntsaria, 2025). While political and economic relations with European partners are suffering, Georgia has instead deepened its economic and trade relations with Russia and China, which will make the country more vulnerable and dependent on authoritarian 'partners' (Personal Interview, December 2024). The current crisis in Georgia may seem like an internal political struggle to many, yet our interlocutors stressed that the processes are heavily influenced by Russia and backed by its influence operations, which it also intensively to destabilise democratic processes in Moldova and Ukraine (Ibid). Given the new reality, in which the new US administration does not seem willing to offer security guarantees to Ukraine, Georgia faces the threat of being swallowed by Russian influence.

## Conflict Regions, Russian Occupation, and the Securitization of Democratization

The unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – territories internationally recognized as part of Georgia and occupied by the Russian Federation since 2008 – constitute a foundational structural constraint on Georgia's democratization. Their impact extends well beyond territorial integrity, shaping domestic political discourse, EU democracy support, and the securitization of governance.

The continued Russian military presence in these regions institutionalizes a condition of permanent insecurity. This has enabled the persistent framing of Georgia as a frontline state exposed to existential threats, thereby elevating security considerations in both domestic policymaking and EU engagement. Russian hybrid tactics linked to the occupied territories,

including disinformation, political proxy networks, and economic coercion, have further blurred the boundaries between external aggression and internal governance challenges.

For Georgian authorities, the occupation has provided a powerful narrative resource. Security arguments are routinely invoked to justify restrictions on political pluralism, civil society activity, and media freedom, portraying dissent as destabilizing or externally manipulated. The adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence exemplifies this dynamic, as civil society actors were framed as potential vectors of foreign interference rather than as democratic stakeholders. Protest movements, including large-scale youth-led mobilizations, have similarly been met with disproportionate police violence justified through securitized rhetoric.

For the EU, the conflict regions have complicated democracy support by reinforcing a dual logic of engagement. On the one hand, the EU has consistently supported Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity through diplomatic means, the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), and assistance under the European Peace Facility. On the other hand, democracy support has increasingly been subordinated to resilience and stability concerns, particularly after 2022. This has contributed to a securitization of EU conditionality, where democratic reforms are framed primarily as instruments for countering Russian influence rather than as ends in themselves.

This dynamic has produced what this chapter conceptualizes as *securitized hollowing*. Rather than strengthening democratic institutions, securitization has facilitated their erosion by allowing executive authorities to prioritize control and stability over accountability and pluralism. At the same time, EU leverage has been weakened by fears of destabilizing a geopolitically vulnerable partner, leading to delayed or limited punitive responses despite clear democratic regression.

Yet, the conflict regions have also reinforced societal pro-Europeanism. For large segments of Georgian society, EU integration is perceived not only as a democratic project but as the most credible long-term security guarantee against Russian domination. This has fueled sustained public mobilization and civil resistance, positioning society – not the state – as the primary carrier of democratic resilience.

## Conclusion

Georgia's recent political trajectory provides strong empirical support for the *securitized hollowing* model developed under InvigoratEU Task 4.1, demonstrating its explanatory value across multiple analytical levels. At the international level, EU conditionality has become more explicit and restrictive, including the suspension of €121 million in direct assistance, the freezing of candidate status in 2024, and the redirection of funding through the European Endowment for Democracy to more than 170 civil society organizations. However, these measures have proven structurally constrained in a regional context marked by sustained Russian hybrid pressure. The legacy of the 2008 territorial occupations continues to generate a pervasive sense of existential insecurity, which is actively instrumentalized by domestic elites to legitimize autocratizing practices, including judicial politicization, electoral irregularities, and violent crackdowns on mass protests in 2024.

These dynamics have progressively hollowed out key democratic foundations – political pluralism, media independence, and the rule of law – despite continued formal alignment with elements of the EU acquis. The decline is empirically visible in Georgia’s six-point drop in Freedom House scores between 2018 and 2024, as well as in the deterioration of its position in V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index. Democratization thus persists at a superficial, procedural level while substantive democratic guarantees erode.

The central analytical contribution – the identification of societal counterbalance as a stabilizing mechanism – is particularly salient in the Georgian case. Horizontal mobilization by civil society actors, youth movements, and transnational networks has leveraged sustained public support for EU integration to construct parallel forms of accountability beyond the state. This societal resilience has so far prevented Georgia’s full transition into consolidated authoritarianism, even as vertical state institutions have weakened.

Nevertheless, the Georgian case also exposes the fragility of this equilibrium under conditions of wartime hybridization. Persistent securitization risks normalizing executive overreach, as resilience narratives gradually displace democratic safeguards. Civil society’s capacity to function as a firewall is increasingly strained by sustained repression and the absence of more robust EU-level punitive instruments, such as the effective deployment of human rights sanctions regimes comparable to Magnitsky-style measures used by the United States and Baltic states. Moreover, the post-Ukraine war geopolitical environment has heightened spoiler incentives, with energy and economic coercion amplifying domestic vulnerabilities.

A comparison with other cases in this study further underscores these dynamics. Moldova illustrates a model of hybrid consolidation, where EU security engagement has been coupled with governance reforms without comparable democratic erosion. Ukraine, by contrast, demonstrates wartime hybridization under conditions of full-scale invasion, where exceptional societal cohesion has temporarily reinforced democratic legitimacy. Georgia occupies a more precarious middle ground, where securitization becomes zero-sum when regional threats are not offset by calibrated countermeasures. This dynamic lies at the core of securitized hollowing, whereby the prioritization of security over accountability undermines democratic capacity while failing to neutralize external coercion.

The policy implications are clear. EU democracy support in Georgia requires recalibration toward a stronger non-state focus, including the systematic prioritization of civil society and independent media ecosystems. This could entail reallocating a significant share of NDICI and EPF funding, potentially exceeding €100 million annually, through rapid and flexible EED mechanisms; expanding the use of qualified majority voting to enable targeted sanctions against democratic spoilers; and embedding societal resilience indicators, such as protest participation, public trust metrics, and pluralism benchmarks, into all conditionality frameworks. By reinforcing societal anchors as the primary drivers of democratization, the EU can mitigate securitized hollowing and re-establish a credible pathway for Georgia’s democratic and enlargement trajectory within an increasingly contested geopolitical order.

## 3 Moldova Case Study

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### Moldova's Democratization Path

This chapter draws on InvigoratEU's Task 4.1 conceptual framework, which reimagines democratisation as a dynamic interplay across international (EU conditionality), regional (Russian hybrid pressures), state (institutional reforms), and societal (grassroots mobilisation) levels – particularly in conflict-torn settings. Moldova exemplifies the **Hybrid Consolidation** model: securitisation here acts not as a threat to democracy but as a catalyst, weaving security measures like the EUPM Moldova mission and EPF funding into normative reforms. This fusion has fortified resilience amid Transnistria's frozen conflict and energy coercion, yielding steady gains – from Freedom House scores rising from 57 (2018) to 64 (2024), to robust public backing for EU integration (over 70%) – without compromising pluralism.

Before 2019, Moldova's democratization process met significant obstacles, although it had notably never fallen into the trap of a pro-Russian restoration. In mid-2019, Moldova made a massive step toward real democratic regime change; Moldova's voters chose the popular anti-corruption activist Maia Sandu to head their government, eventually making her president (Schwartz, 2020). Sandu's Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) won an absolute majority in Moldova's 2021 parliamentary election with the promise of enacting ambitious legal and economic reforms, with which it has had middling success. Sandu and the PAS' lagging support under Prime Minister Dorin Recean and the effectiveness of Russian interference were on display during the presidential election (2024), which was also tied to an EU referendum (Calugareanu and Schwartz, 2023). Sandu eventually won convincingly in the second round of voting, but the referendum on EU integration barely passed (Verseck, 2024). Shortly before the vote, authorities in Moldova announced they had uncovered a network of operatives that had successfully purchased as many as 300,000 votes in the tally.

Russian impact on democratization in the Republic of Moldova has been predominantly constraining through the Transnistrian conflict, Political influence and Party support, Energy leverage. Energy vulnerability reduces policy autonomy and weakens public trust in democratic governance during crises. Through its involvement Russia has threatened democratic consolidation and state sovereignty. Nevertheless, Moldova has demonstrated increasing democratic resilience. The country's EU integration path, civil society strength and reform-oriented leadership continue to counterbalance Russian influence.

### EU Actions in the Republic of Moldova

The EU is a key strategic partner of the Republic of Moldova, actively supporting democratic transformation, good governance, and rule of law.

On June 27, 2014, the EU and Moldova signed the Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (European Union, 2023). The Agreement facilitated trade further through a gradual approximation of Moldovan legislation, rules, and procedures, including standards, to those of the EU. The Agreement was provisionally applied

from September 1, 2014, until completion of the ratification process, which allowed the full application of the Association Agreement from July 1, 2016.

In 2022, the European Council recognized Moldova's European perspective, opening a new strategic phase for EU-Moldova relations. On March 3, 2022, Moldova submitted its application for EU membership. On June 17, 2022, the European Commission presented its Opinion on Moldova's application (European Commission, 2022b). On June 23, the European Council took the historical decision to recognize Moldova's European perspective and to grant it EU candidate country status (European Council, 2022). The European Council has since invited the European Commission to report on Moldova's progress. In November 2023, the European Commission issued a recommendation to open accession negotiations with Moldova. In December 2023, following the Commission's recommendation, EU leaders decided to open accession negotiations with Moldova, and in March 2024, EU leaders invited the Council to swiftly adopt the draft negotiation framework (European Council, 2024). On June 25, 2024, the EU held its first accession conference with Moldova, formally opening the membership negotiations with the country, and the approval by the Council on June 21, 2024 of the Negotiating Framework (European Council, 2024; Council of the European Union, 2024; European Union, 2024).

The EU-Moldova Association Agreement continues to be a driver for reforms and alignment with the EU's *acquis*. An updated EU-Moldova Association Agenda for the period 2021-2027 was adopted on August 22, 2022. It comprises jointly agreed priorities on further implementation of the Association Agreement and sets an ambitious program of reforms. The European Commission has published annual country reports in 2023 and 2024 on Moldova as part of its regular enlargement package (European Commission, 2023a; 2024a).

The Republic of Moldova has benefited from EU cooperation programs since 2006. Past programs backed by the EU aimed at supporting the reform process of the judicial system, improving access to justice, combat economic crime, strengthening cyber-resilience, and countering discrimination, hate speech, and hate crime. Similarly, voluntary contributions by EU Member States have ensured the implementation of projects focused on promoting a human rights-compliant criminal justice system, strengthening the prison and probation reforms, fighting corruption, improving electoral practices, and protecting the rights of vulnerable groups, including but not limited to women, children, migrants, and refugees.

The EU continues to stand in solidarity with Moldova and is committed to continue strengthening Moldova's resilience through financial and technical assistance. The EU is by far the largest donor in Moldova, supporting political and economic reform and providing humanitarian aid, mobilizing more than €2.2 billion since 2021. On April 4, 2022, following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and its detrimental effects on Moldova's economic and financial stability, the Council decided to provide a new macro-financial assistance operation of €150 million in the form of loans and grants to the Republic of Moldova. (Council of the European Union, 2022). To help support Moldova's integration into the EU, the Commission has also presented a Growth Plan for Moldova on October 10, 2024 (European Commission, 2024b). The plan aims at boosting socio-economic convergence with the Union and accelerating fundamental reforms. This is the largest EU financial support package

since Moldova's independence and comes on top of other substantial EU support to the country.

The EU and Moldova signed a security and defense partnership on May 21, 2024, during the eighth EU-Moldova Association Council (European External Action Service, 2024c). Moldova is the first country to sign such a partnership with the EU. This partnership boosts dialogue and cooperation in areas such as countering hybrid threats, cybersecurity, fighting disinformation, training, and capacity building. It also paves the way towards exploring new avenues and areas of cooperation on security and defense.

Since 2021, the EU has allocated €197 million of financing through the EPF to support the modernization and operational effectiveness of the Moldovan armed forces (European Council and Council of the European Union, 2025a). As a result, Moldova is the second-largest beneficiary of the EPF assistance after Ukraine. Moldova activated the EU civil protection mechanism to support Ukrainians arriving in Moldova (European Council and Council of the European Union, 2025b), while EU Member States have offered various forms of assistance to Moldova, including shelter, hygiene kits, and power generators. The EU has allocated €84 million in humanitarian assistance for Moldova.

The current leadership of the Republic of Moldova has made important progress in its reform agenda. At the same time, it has increasingly faced direct threats to its stability coming from both internal groups with vested interests and from Russia. The two often collude to derail the country from its reform path. In this context, at the European Council, on March 23, 2023, EU leaders pledged to continue to provide all relevant support to the country, including strengthening its resilience, security, stability, economy, and energy supply in the face of destabilizing activities by external actors.

On April 24, 2023, the EU launched the civil mission – EU Partnership Mission in Moldova (EUPM Moldova) – under the CSDP and with the aim of strengthening the resilience of Moldova's security sector in the areas of crisis management and hybrid threats, including cybersecurity and countering foreign information manipulation and interference. On April 28, 2023, the Council adopted a new framework for targeted restrictive measures, which provides the EU with the possibility of imposing sanctions against persons responsible for supporting or implementing actions that undermine or threaten the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Moldova, as well as the country's democracy, the rule of law, stability, or security (European Union, 2023b).

This legal framework for targeted restrictive measures was adopted at the request of the Republic of Moldova. Under this regime of sanctions, the EU can, for instance, target individuals who obstruct or undermine the democratic political process (such as the holding of elections) or attempt to overthrow the constitutional order, including through acts of violence. Future restrictive measures could also target individuals who engage in serious financial misconduct concerning public funds and the unauthorized export of capital. The sanctions regime was last extended until April 29, 2026 (European Union, n.d.).

A form of EU interventionism aimed at addressing the consequences of Russian militaristic revanchism in the region is the EUPM, which is designed to foster resilience against Russian

interference (European External Action Service, 2023). Moldova has been grappling with political struggles between a Western and Ukraine-oriented government and pro-Russian political proxies who seek to exploit socioeconomic repercussions to incite mass protests, potentially triggering a chain reaction of geopolitical consequences. To advocate for an EU mission under CSDP, the Moldovan government has highlighted the Russian threat. In different circumstances, such a civil mission would have likely faced rejection, even by the EU, which already oversees a technical mission at the Moldovan Ukrainian border (EUBAM) tasked with monitoring customs and trade flows linked to the Transnistrian breakaway region.

## Conflict and Post-Conflict Contexts

Moldova's progress toward EU integration is closely linked to unresolved internal challenges including the Transnistrian conflict, which continues to affect state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and governance.

The conflict region of Transnistria emerged in the early 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union and driven by political, linguistic, and geopolitical tensions. In the "consultative referendum on the future status of Moldova" of 6 March 1994, 95% of the voters (in a 75% turn-out) voted for an independent republic. Because of these developments, Transnistria's leaders now seem more willing to negotiate a solution that keeps the region within Moldova's internationally recognized borders. At the same time, Russian troops (the 14th Army) should leave the region, as agreed in a deal signed in Moscow on October 21, 1994, even though Russia has not yet officially approved that agreement (Parliamentary Assembly, 1995).

### Role of Civil Society

Civil society in Transnistria operates under constant pressure, including legal uncertainty, surveillance, and political interference. Civil society's contribution to democratization is often indirect and fragile. International donors and NGOs play a key role in sustaining civil society in Transnistria by providing platforms for engagement. Within this framework, the EU presence is significant in contributing to Moldova's security and regional stability. In the context of frozen conflict, promoting civic participation, protecting social space for dialogue, and building bridges across conflict lines is the most realistic and sustainable path forward.

## Geopolitical Factors and Considerations

The EU's geopolitics (or a lack thereof)

Moldova's trajectory since 2022 illustrates both the promises and the pitfalls of accession-driven democratization under acute geopolitical stress. The shock of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine catalyzed a decisive reframing: enlargement was recast as a strategic instrument. This reframing was accompanied by the articulation of an EU-Moldova Security and Defense Partnership and, earlier, by the establishment of a dedicated civilian CSDP mission – EUPM Moldova (European External Action Service, 2023). The EU moved from a

predominantly regulatory approach to one that explicitly couples democratization with state resilience and security policy.

The EU's CSDP and military assistance programs, like the EPF, impact Moldova's democratization by supporting security sector reforms, enhancing institutional resilience against hybrid threats, and fostering alignment with EU foreign policy. This is primarily achieved through the civilian EUPM Moldova, which strengthens civilian institutions, and the EPF's funding for military modernization, which supports the construction of a stable foundation for democratic development amidst external destabilization efforts.

Several Member States – Germany, Sweden, Romania, the Netherlands, and Austria – scaled up targeted bilateral support after 2022, focusing on governance, civil society, anti-corruption, energy efficiency, and connectivity. These programs can complement EU instruments, increase political salience domestically, and sharpen conditionality by tying assistance to measurable governance outcomes. To avoid fragmentation, coordination with EU programming and transparent reporting against shared benchmarks is essential.

The EU is also supporting Moldova's reforms through efforts to strengthen its administrative capacity through advisory services focused on challenges arising from the accession process, dedicated training and support programs, as well as increased participation in EU programs. Moldova currently participates in programs such as: Horizon Europe, Fiscalis, Customs, LIFE, EU4Health, the Connecting Europe Facility, the Single Market program, the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), Digital Europe, and the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI).

Some of these efforts are set out in the Support Package for the Republic of Moldova presented by President von der Leyen in June 2023, which aims to address the impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and bring Moldova closer to the EU (European Commission, 2023b). The package was presented in recognition of the challenges faced by Moldova since the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, such as large numbers of refugees, inflation, threats to its energy supplies, violations of its airspace, as well as a multitude of hybrid attacks, such as disinformation and cyber-attacks.

The EU is supporting Moldova's energy security through increased domestic electricity production, participation in the EU common gas purchasing mechanism, and emphasis on renewables and energy efficiency. During the 5<sup>th</sup> High-Level Energy Dialogue on February 2, 2024, Moldova and the EU endorsed a new Joint Moldova-Energy Community and European Commission Roadmap (European Union Delegation to the Republic of Moldova, 2024). This roadmap sets out further reforms covering the gas and electricity markets as well as measures to boost energy efficiency and renewable energy capacity. In addition to energy security, the EU is providing technical support to the Moldovan government as well as capacity building for independent media, civil society, and youth to address disinformation and communicate actively the benefits of EU integration.

#### Russia's geopolitics

The Republic of Moldova and its roughly 3.5 million citizens are barely consequential to Russia economically, but they have nevertheless been the target of Russian neo-imperial

aggression for three decades. It was in Moldova, in the spring of 1992, that Russia launched its first post-Soviet war against an independent country – under the same pretext it would use repeatedly thereafter – to protect Russian-speaking citizens from a supposedly fascist national government.

The Kremlin supports a separatist regime of Russian secret agents in Moldova's Transnistria region and has remained in breach of international law by stationing its own soldiers and a massive arms arsenal there (Calugareanu and Verseck, 2024). Moscow has also used Moldova's banks to distribute billions of dollars across the globe as part of its "Russian Laundromat" system and constantly threatens the country by shutting down gas deliveries. Russia is also actively trying to exert control over Gagauzia in southern Moldova through Shorstyle proxy political parties.

Moldova's EU integration process takes place within the context of intense Russian hybrid warfare manifested using pro-Russian political parties and actors as proxies, spreading disinformation and propaganda, promoting secessionist sentiments, and weaponizing energy dependence (Wesslau, 2024).

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moldova has experienced a sharp increase in hybrid attacks and attempts to undermine its democratic institutions. To help counter these, Moldova asked for support from the EU, which the EU delivered under the CSDP. The EUPM in Moldova was set up in record time and inaugurated by former High Representative Josep Borrell during his visit to Moldova. EUPM is the first civilian CSDP mission specifically focused on building a partner's resilience against hybrid threats, including cyber-attacks and FIMI.

#### Other regional actors' geopolitics

China has expanded its presence in Eastern Europe, including Moldova, primarily through economic, diplomatic, and infrastructure-related engagement. China's soft power in Moldova remains modest. While cultural diplomacy, scholarships, and humanitarian gestures exist, they do not significantly shape public attitude toward governance or democratic values. China does not function as a promoter of democratization in the Republic of Moldova; it acts as a pragmatic geopolitical actor offering economic cooperation. While this model may indirectly affect democratic incentives, its impact remains limited due to Moldova's strategic commitment to EU integration

Turkey's engagement in Moldova is shaped by historical, cultural, economic and strategic considerations with the Gagauzia, inhabited primarily by the Orthodox Turkic-speaking Gagauz people (Bustos, 2022). In recent years, Ankara has sought to strengthen ties with Turkic states and populations to expand its influence (Euractiv, 2022). While its engagement contributes to social cohesion and regional stability, particularly in Gagauzia, it has a limited and ambiguous impact on democratic governance.

## Conclusion

Since Moldova applied for EU membership in March 2022, the country has made tremendous progress in its EU integration process, obtaining EU candidate status in June 2022

and launching accession negotiations in 2024. Moreover, despite unprecedented Russian malign interference, the referendum on European integration held in October 2024 obtained a majority in favour of enshrining European integration in the constitution as a strategic objective.

Despite the EU's support to democratization in Moldova through the enlargement process, the country's democratic progress remains susceptible to Russia's presence and influence, which operates through hybrid warfare and political proxies. Continued EU efforts to strengthen Moldova's apparatus against Russia's foreign interference is essential to ensure deep and comprehensive democratic reforms.

Moldova's path thus illustrates Hybrid Consolidation: the shadow of low-intensity conflict – Transnistria's separatists, Russian vote-buying, and gas leverage – has not derailed but deepened democratisation. EU tools, from €2.2 billion in NDICI aid to the €1.9 billion Reform and Growth Facility and EUPM's hybrid defence, have masterfully coupled security with governance, fostering state-societal synergies under President Sandu's PAS leadership and vibrant civil society campaigns. Unlike Georgia's securitised hollowing, Moldova's pluralism thrives through built-in safeguards like CSO consultations, sustaining reform momentum despite headwinds. For the EU, the lesson is clear: nurture this delicate equilibrium by expanding EPF for cyber and energy resilience, paired with routine pluralism audits, to shield against spoilers and pave a resilient road to enlargement.

## 4 Ukraine Case Study: the weight, price and priorities of promoting democracy in Ukraine in the war

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This chapter applies InvigoratEU's Task 4.1 conceptual framework, which conceives of democratisation as the interplay of international (EU conditionality), regional (Russian aggression), state-level (institutional adaptation), and societal (civil society mobilisation) dynamics, particularly in contexts of acute conflict. Ukraine exemplifies wartime hybridisation, where securitisation intensifies under full-scale invasion, integrating EU military assistance (EPF, Ukraine Facility) with governance reforms, as societal actors – through volunteer networks and digital accountability mechanisms – sustain pluralism amid suspended elections. This process registers in Freedom House scores advancing modestly from 59.9 (2018) to 61.2 (2025), underpinned by 74% public support for EU integration.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine contributed to the nation's pro-European unification and accelerated its integration processes. EU integration is an important factor in resisting the aggression of the totalitarian Russian regime, on the one hand, and a driver of democratic reforms, on the other.

The establishment of European democratic norms in Ukraine is of particular importance for Kyiv and Brussels not only in a bilateral context, but also in a more global sense: given the US's current refusal to defend democracy in the world, the EU is now the main and only global center for supporting and promoting democracy, freedom, justice, and human rights, i.e., basic civilizational values.

Recent geopolitical changes and new challenges both in Europe and the world dictate adaptation to the current realities of the EU's foreign affairs, including its enlargement policy, which should gain new dynamics. The European integration process has to combine the EU's current security interests with the strategic objectives of ensuring the sustainability of candidates' democratic institutions. While fighting the war, Ukraine is paying an immense price for its EU-bound movement, which necessitates an intensive negotiation process.

### EU Eastern Policy: Ukrainian direction

The evolution of the EU's strategy towards Ukraine can be divided into two stages: cooperation within the European Neighbourhood Policy (1991 – 2022) and full-scale integration of Ukraine as an EU candidate (2022 – present). EU's policy towards Ukraine was moulded under tough conditions, including geopolitical reformatting of the post-Soviet space and the establishment of Ukrainian statehood. The main stages of this process are outlined in Annex I.

The *first* stage (1991 – 2022) was marked by several key challenges. *First*, Ukraine's democratic transformation was hampered by internal issues associated with difficult statehood formation, uncertain geopolitical priorities, the burden of the Soviet legacy, poor governance, slow reform of the legal and regulatory system, etc.

*Second*, the EU was not ready for Ukraine's full-scale integration. In particular, the 19<sup>th</sup> EU-Ukraine Summit (July 2017) ended without the signing of a final statement as some member

states opposed the inclusion of a clause on Ukraine's European aspirations. Brussels was sceptical about Kyiv's membership prospects but encouraged Ukraine to implement reforms, making demands similar to those of candidate states and providing only limited financial and economic assistance.

*Third*, with Putin's coming to power in Russia, Ukraine received an alternative to the EU – Eurasian integration in line with Moscow. Under President Leonid Kuchma (1994–2004), the country pursued a multi-vector policy of manoeuvring between Brussels and Moscow. During the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich (2010–2014), Kyiv started to drift pro-Russia while imitating democratic reforms.

The specifics of the second stage (2022 – present) are outlined in the subsections below. It is worth noting that the large-scale war in Europe unleashed by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022 has dramatically changed the world picture, causing turbulence in the political, economic, and security environments at the regional and global levels. With geopolitical challenges and unfavourable socio-economic trends accumulating, Moscow's aggressive neo-imperial policy has aggravated the confrontation between global centres of influence and raised the threat of conflict escalation on the European continent.

The "American factor" has significantly changed the geopolitical landscape. Donald Trump's personalized, unpredictable, and American-centric policy has caused turbulence and uncertainty in US relations with other countries, including the EU. The US distancing itself from Europe's problems has given rise to the idea of EU's self-sufficiency and freedom from external dependence. At the same time, Trump's ongoing attempts to appease the Russian dictator and achieve peace at the expense of aggression victim have proved fruitless.

### Financial support for democratic processes

The EU's limited financial support for democratic reforms in Ukraine during the first stage stemmed from strategic uncertainty in Brussels-Kyiv relations and a focus on aid to already integrated CEE countries. From 1991 to 2016, the EU signed a total of 137 agreements with Ukraine to finance various projects, including on democracy, such as justice sector reforms, community development, migration management. In 2014, the parties signed a €10 million agreement to finance Ukraine Civil Society Support programme. In 2019, a similar agreement worth €10 million – Support to Civil Society and Culture – was signed between the Government of Ukraine and the European Commission. Over the period 2016–2021, the EU disbursed about €160 million to support public administration reform in Ukraine.

The multi-level grant assistance from public and private foundations in EU member states, along with EU institutions' programs, has been and remains an effective channel for supporting civil society development and implementing Ukraine's democratic transformations. This is mainly support from Western and Northern European countries. Another important component is targeted grants from the European Commission to support democracy and human rights.

The EU's TAIEX and Twinning assistance programmes, designed to promote civil society's involvement in aligning the public administration system with European standards, also deserve attention. From the onset of these programmes in 2006 and until June 2024, as many

as 23,595 Ukrainian officials took part in 979 events. However, the intensity of these programmes has been decreasing recently. In 2024, only 811 representatives of the Ukrainian authorities took part in 23 international events initiated by the European Commission and Ukraine. It is clear that technical programmes will matter in the course of EU membership talks.

Therefore, in the context of the war and considering national businesses' limited capabilities, Western assistance is the main contributor to civil society and its activities in various fields. Moreover, European support for democratic reforms in Ukraine is now becoming crucial, given that, in January 2025, the new Trump administration suspended the activities of USAID – an agency that funded numerous civic initiatives, NGOs, cultural programmes, charitable foundations, and media projects in Ukraine. More than 100 of these projects have reportedly been suspended.

The large-scale Ukraine Facility Plan, a €50 billion assistance programme established in May 2024, is the driver and financial basis for further democratic transformation (European Commission, n.d.). As part of its reform process, the plan aims at implementing public administration and judicial reforms, ensuring the rule of law, promoting gender equality, introducing sound financial management and combating corruption and fraud. It is important that the Plan, which also includes pre-accession assistance, has relevant indicators, a set of benchmarks, and a corresponding schedule of tranches.

Furthermore, the EU is financially, politically, and organisationally supporting the negotiations on Ukraine's EU accession, which should begin with the basic issues of democracy, rule of law, and human rights. The scale of involvement of Ukrainian state structures and civil society institutions in the negotiations is quite impressive. According to the government, as of January 2025, more than 100 state institutions (almost 1,000 people), 100 MPs and representatives of the Verkhovna Rada staff, 292 representatives of the public and business, 43 academics, and other stakeholders are involved in 36 national negotiation groups.

## Civil society of Ukraine: dynamics and features

Civil society in Ukraine had significant experience in actively defending democracy at the beginning of the period of state independence already. Subsequently, society demonstrated examples of mass protests against attempts by the authorities to restrict rights and freedoms. These resonant actions led to a change of governments and were called revolutions.

In general, the pre-war period of the formation of civil society in Ukraine was characterized by following trends: a) citizens gained experience in self-organization to realize their rights and interests, which formed the foundations of a developed civil society; b) the process of overcoming stereotypes, rooted in the period when Ukraine was part of the USSR, continued; c) a generation of people who were mainly oriented towards European values, appropriate ways of business and life grew up; d) a fairly developed legislative framework that regulates the activities of civil society institutions was formed (Yakymenko et al., 2021).

But during the pre-war decades, the declared course towards European integration and democratization was hindered not only by opposition from Russia, but primarily by the

reluctance of the Ukrainian authorities to implement fundamental changes aimed at the democratization of public life, the “Europeanization” of the system of government, etc. This caused distrust and a critical attitude towards the ruling elite and political elite in general. In Ukrainian society, sentiments towards the further consolidation of democracy and readiness for a dialogue with the authorities on the development of a state based on the rule of law accumulated (ibid). Human rights, anti-corruption, cultural and educational organizations were the most active. They achieved public dialogue with the authorities and participation in state affairs, including through the creation of state departments advisory bodies public councils (almost 1,000 such structures have been created under regional executive bodies alone).

The qualities of civil society (social activity, self-organization, solidarity, mutual assistance) were most clearly manifested in Ukraine during the war period. In particular, the Russian aggression in 2014 mobilized citizens to support military units, wounded in military hospitals, civilians affected by hostilities, refugees, and families of deceased Ukrainian soldiers. In general, the war provided powerful incentives for the development of civil society organizations. The volunteer movement has reached an unseen before large scale. In 2023, 46% of public organizations provided assistance to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, 26% – to victims of Russian aggression (National Institute for Strategic Studies. n.d.). At present, there are 33 thousand charity organisations and 11 thousand registered volunteers in Ukraine (Detector Media, 2025). In general, civil society and volunteer organizations enjoy a high level of public trust and respect.

Speaking about the evolution of Ukrainian civil society during the war, it is worth paying attention to certain important trends.

**First.** In times of war, there is a growth and strengthening of the system of civil institutions. In particular, as of the beginning of 2020, there were over 88,000 public organizations in Ukraine (Yakymenko et al., 2021).<sup>2</sup> In 2022 in Ukraine 96,543 public organizations were active and in 2024, their number reached 104,483 (Ukrinform, 2024).

The international project "Civil Society Organizations Sustainability Index» in 2022 reported very positive trends in the public sector of Ukraine. Democratic institutions are at the stage of evolving sustainability – a step towards enhanced sustainability (USAID, n.d.)

**Second.** The development of multi-party system is influenced by the conditions of war and the legal regime of martial law. In the conditions of Russian aggression, some parties that supported the aggressor state and carried out subversive activities were banned (more on this below). At the same time, a stable consensus has now been formed among parliamentary political forces regarding the fight against the Russian aggressor and the course towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration. At the same time, unfortunately, there are manifestations of pressure on some opposition parties from the authorities.

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<sup>2</sup> About 2,000 public associations, over 36,000 religious organizations, over 28,000 trade unions and their associations, over 300 creative associations, and over 19,000 charitable organizations.

In general, under current conditions, parties do not conduct political activities in the regions, focusing on security issues, support for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, volunteer activities, promotion of national interests and initiatives on the world stage, the peace negotiation process, etc. At the same time, the organizational structures of most leading parties are in a waiting mode for the future elections. At the same time, the low level of public trust in political parties should be noted.

In the post-war period, the issue of full-scale restoration of the competitive political process, development of public dialogue on issues relevant to society in the post-war reconstruction of the country, as well as freedom of the media, is becoming more relevant.

**Third. As a result of Russia's full-scale aggression, the Ukrainian media sector has found itself in a state of crisis. In 2022–2024, 329 media outlets stopped working, of which 277 were never able to resume operations (Razumkov Centre, 2025). As of March 2025, at least 117 journalists have been killed since the start of the full-scale invasion. The financial conditions of the national media are quite difficult. The cancellation of USAID funding negatively affected the state of Ukrainian mass media and led to the suspension or significant reduction of a number of media projects.**

The National Union of Journalists of Ukraine reported that 26% of editorial offices worked without pay, relying only on the enthusiasm of journalists, and the majority have a limited margin of financial strength (2025). In particular, only 18% of editorial offices will be able to work for more than six months without external financial assistance, 41% – up to six months, 24% – up to three months, 17% – one month (ibid). More than 77% of local media operate with rather limited monthly budgets, which are enough only for minimum salaries of employees and leave no opportunities for the development and improvement of content.

At the same time, in the conditions of large-scale hybrid aggression, the authorities were forced to introduce certain restrictions on freedom of speech and the free flow of information. One of the first regulatory acts that defined the restrictions on freedom of speech was the Decree of the President of Ukraine "On the introduction of martial law in Ukraine" (2022). Subsequently, the following norms were introduced into the criminal and criminal procedural legislation of Ukraine: a) prohibiting the dissemination of information about the movement of weapons, the deployment of the Armed Forces of Ukraine; b) establish criminal liability for justifying, denying armed aggression; c) recognizing as criminally punishable the actions of media collaborators, cooperation with the aggressor state and/or the occupation administration.

But on the other hand, the Law of Ukraine "About the media", which brought Ukrainian legislation in the media sector closer to European standards, came into force in 2023 (Verkhovna Rada, 2023). The law, in particular, provides for reducing the influence of government agencies on the media and ensuring the editorial independence of the latter. However, it is problematic to fully implement these legislative norms during the war. It is worth recalling that the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine in 2024 issued the Order "On the approval of the Roadmap to support the restoration of a pluralistic, transparent and independent post-war media space after the termination or lifting of martial law". (Verkhovna Rada, 2024a)

During the years of war, Ukrainian civil society in difficult conditions demonstrated a unique potential for self-organization, indomitability and resilience, readiness to resist Russian aggression and to defend the European path of the country's development, democratic values and freedoms, and the rule of law.

## Some peculiarities of Ukraine's movement towards the EU

When assessing the nature of democratic transformation amidst full-scale Russian aggression, some specific features are worth noting.

**Social processes.** The war has strengthened Ukraine's pro-European unity and reinforced democratic values, for which Ukrainians are fighting on the frontline. The belief in Ukraine's irreversible path toward EU integration has become deeply ingrained. These trends are illustrated by Annex II.

Ukraine stands in a unique situation of broad public consensus, with leading political forces, NGOs, the expert community, the media and society as a whole supporting the country's EU integration and the need for relevant democratic reforms. Moreover, there is no visible anti-European sentiment in the public discourse. It is also clear that the realistic prospect of joining the EU is a powerful moral and psychological incentive and additional motivation for Ukrainians, especially in the context of a protracted war.

**Turbo mode of European reforms.** After receiving the candidate status and recommendations from the European Commission in June 2022, Ukraine activated the "turbo mode" of pro-European transformations, as evidenced by a) the adoption of some basic laws (on national minorities, media, and the Constitutional Court) and a package of sectoral laws on the adaptation of national legislation in various areas (economy, transport, public procurement, intellectual property, etc.); b) the renewal and reboot of the highest judicial bodies and anti-corruption institutions (re-constructing the Economic Security Bureau, granting the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office an independent status); and c) the approval of the state anti-corruption programme and strategy for reforming law enforcement agencies. Since 2013, Ukraine has gradually improved its standings in the Corruption Perceptions Index by 11 points and ranks 104<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries. In 2023, Ukraine moved up 18 positions in the World Press Freedom Index to rank 61<sup>st</sup> (Reporters without Borders, 2025). In August 2024, Ukraine ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. In the second half of 2024, the preparation of roadmaps for public administration and rule of law reform is underway.

In 2025, Ukraine and the EU completed all procedures for opening almost all negotiation chapters, primarily the basic one, "Fundamentals of the EU Accession Process." On May 14, the Ukrainian government approved roadmaps in the areas of the rule of law, public administration reform, and the functioning of democratic institutions. A plan of measures to protect the rights of national minorities was also adopted.

However, Ukraine subsequently took a temporary step back from pro-European reforms. On July 22, 2025, the Verkhovna Rada adopted and the president signed a law establishing control over the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) by the Prosecutor General. This provoked a

sharp negative reaction from the EU and sparked large-scale public protests in various regions of Ukraine. In light of this, on July 31, the independence of NABU and SAPO was legally restored.

Ukraine attempted to compensate for this misstep with pro-European integration activities. The government approved a draft of a new Customs Code based on EU customs legislation. The Verkhovna Rada adopted a bill on vocational education that is important for European integration. A new director of the Economic Security Bureau of Ukraine was appointed. In August, the new Prime Minister of Ukraine, Yulia Svyrydenko, presented the draft Action Program of the new Government, which states in point 2 that “by the end of 2025, the Government will be ready to start negotiations on six clusters.”

However, the path to European integration still has a lot of sensitive issues, such as the anti-corruption efforts, decentralization, public administration reform, judicial reform (including filling vacancies in the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Justice, rebooting the Supreme Court, and setting up specialized administrative courts).

The European Commission, in its annual report on enlargement, provided fairly high marks for the pace of Ukraine's European integration on most negotiation chapters, stated readiness to open clusters 1, 2 and 6 (European Commission, 2025). An obvious priority for Ukraine is to implement the reforms envisaged in cluster "foundations" – democratization, rule of law, effective public administration and anti-corruption, etc. In particular, these include: the restoration of competitions for civil service; optimization of legislation on local state administrations and on declarations of integrity of judges; ensuring the effective participation of independent experts in appointment procedures to justice bodies; rebooting the Supreme Court; introducing competitive selection procedures for positions in the Prosecutor's Office, etc. Also among the urgent tasks is the implementation of effective investigations and adoption of relevant court decisions on high-profile corruption cases. Another strategically important step is the implementation of the National Program for Harmonisation of National Legislation to the EU Acquis, which should become the basic guide for reforms.

At the same time, the opening of negotiations on Ukraine's membership in the EU remains uncertain due to Hungary's potential veto. The June EU summit de jure put Ukraine's European integration on hold. Political uncertainty in the European direction in the context of war is an unfavorable factor that may affect the pace of pro-European reforms and public opinion.

But in this regard, a strategically important event took place on December 11, 2025, when the EU Council on General Affairs opened a technical negotiation process on Ukraine's accession to the EU (this concerns clusters 1,2,6). In parallel, a corresponding Action Plan for Ukraine was agreed, which identifies 10 priorities, in particular, specific measures to reform and improve the judicial system and law enforcement agencies, strengthen the independence and expand the jurisdiction of anti-corruption institutions, etc. The launch of accession negotiations (even in a technical format) defines specific directions and tasks of democratic reforms in Ukraine, indicators of strengthening the rule of law.

*Treaty-based and legal support for protecting and implementing democratic transformations.* In addition to the relevant European integration commitments, Ukraine signed a series of long-term security cooperation agreements with 28 countries (as well as the EU) in 2024. These documents set out Ukraine's obligation to keep up democratic reforms. In particular, in the agreement with Germany, Ukraine committed to continue focusing on "justice, the rule of law, decentralisation, the fight against corruption and money laundering" (President of Ukraine, 2024a). In the Joint Security Commitments between Ukraine and the European Union (June 2024), "Ukraine commits to step up reform efforts, notably in the area of rule of law, in line with the merit-based nature of the accession process and with the assistance of the EU" (President of Ukraine, 2024b). As noted above, the Ukraine Facility also contains a set of systemic commitments to ensure the sustainability of democratic institutions and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in line with European norms and standards.

Democratic reforms are also being carried out as part of the implementation of the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement. The annual government report on its implementation for 2024 notes that 93% of the section "Justice, Freedom, Security, and Human Rights" has been executed (Government of Ukraine, 2025). This includes improving the judicial system, preventing cruel treatment of people, ensuring freedom of speech under martial law, and so on.

Therefore, the provision of critical military, financial, and economic assistance to Ukraine is directly linked to the effectiveness of democratic reforms in various areas. For example, in July 2025, the fourth tranche under the Ukraine Facility was reduced from €4.5 billion to €3.05 billion because Ukraine failed to implement three of the 16 reforms: decentralization, reform of the Asset Management Agency, and selection of judges for the Supreme Anti-Corruption Court.

In essence, Ukrainian national survival depends on the level of democracy in the country.

## Challenges and specifics of protecting and promoting democracy in times of war

Having borne the brunt of Russia's military aggression and suffering immense human, financial, and economic losses, Ukraine has defended the EU's Eastern flank while fighting for its own democratic future. Internal democratic transformations amidst the full-scale war are unique and include armed defence, preservation, and further improvement of the democratic foundations of social development (Мамченко, 2023). A focus remains on preventing negative trends that may result from restrictions caused by the prolonged martial law (President of Ukraine, 2024c).

In a broad sense, this means ensuring the foundations of Ukraine's democratic stability during a protracted war. This implies, firstly, the irreversibility of the democratic transformations being carried out under the restrictions of martial law, synergy of partnership between the authorities and civil society in implementing pro-European reforms. Second, achieving a broad public consensus on the need for certain compulsory restrictions during the war. Thirdly, gaining effective protection and immunity from external hybrid influences.

So, when speaking about the status and peculiarities of democratic processes in Ukraine during the war, one should consider the following aspects.

**First. Some forced restrictions on rights and freedoms.** Following Russia's armed intervention in 2014, which occupied parts of Ukrainian territories and threatened its national statehood, Kyiv had to retreat from some of its international commitments in the field of democracy and human rights. In May 2015, in the aftermath of the occupation of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the Verkhovna Rada adopted a statement "On Ukraine's derogation from certain obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms" (2025).

In this statement, based on previous legislative acts adopted by the Verkhovna Rada, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is instructed to inform the UN Secretary General of these derogations in accordance with Article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe in accordance with Article 15 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

This primarily referred to restrictions on the observance of some articles related to the provision of legal defence in criminal proceedings, the right to liberty and security of a person, the inviolability of the home, correspondence, etc. Since 2015, Ukraine has been regularly informing the Council of Europe about the situation in observance of its human rights obligations.

With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the government introduced martial law, which is still in force. According to the relevant Presidential Decree, constitutional rights and freedoms **may be** restricted for the duration of this regime, including freedom of speech, movement, and elections (President of Ukraine Zelenskyy, 2022). In April 2024, Ukraine once again notified the Council of Europe, clarifying the list of existing restrictions. In particular, the derogations would no longer apply to articles on forced labour, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the right to an effective remedy, restrictions on the political activities of foreigners, etc.

The declared possibility of restricting rights and freedoms in Ukraine was a forced measure that has never become a widespread practice or an obstacle to democratic processes. This legal instrument is aimed solely at ensuring internal conditions for countering Russian aggression. Moreover, there is a broad demand in Ukrainian society to preserve and promote the democratic values that Ukrainians defend in their fight against the totalitarian Russian regime.

A telling fact was the mass protests involving thousands of people on July 22-31, 2025, against restrictions on the independence of anti-corruption agencies. The protests, initiated by the youth, spread to about 16 large cities and regions of Ukraine and forced the authorities to revoke this decision. Overall, this shows that martial law did not stop democratic processes. Ukrainian civil society demonstrated maturity, unity, and a willingness to defend democratic values even in wartime.

**Second. The problem of elections.** Ukrainian legislation prohibits holding elections during martial law. The full-scale war prevents legitimate election campaigns due to various security and operational factors, such as the inability to secure all participants in the election process – due to the vast number of refugees, internally displaced persons, and deployed members of the Armed Forces – and the destroyed infrastructure. In September 2023, more than 100 Ukrainian NGOs called for no elections during the war (Укрінформ, 2023). Nonetheless, this issue is actively discussed in expert communities and societies, especially in terms of appropriate preparation and conditions for post-war elections (Razumkov Centre, 2024). In early 2025, the European Commission’s Director-General for Eastern Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, Gert Jan Koopman, and the US Special Envoy for Ukraine, Keith Kellogg, signalled to Kyiv that Ukraine should consider easing martial law and preparing for elections. In February 2025, Donald Trump accused Volodymyr Zelenskyy of “refusing to hold elections.” Russia has long been speculating on the false theme of an “unconstitutional coup” in Ukraine in 2024 and the “illegitimacy” of the Ukrainian government.

The topic of Ukrainian elections gained new traction during the US–Russia talks on 18 February 2025 in Saudi Arabia. Subsequently, Putin and Kremlin officials repeatedly declared Zelenskyy’s “illegitimacy”, falsifying the provisions of the Ukrainian Constitution (Article 108). This should be viewed solely as a tool to block the peace negotiation process.

During the next phase of the peace negotiation process (November–December 2025), the topic of elections in Ukraine was again brought up. Zelenskyy declared his fundamental readiness to hold presidential elections under conditions of ensuring their security, including the cessation of hostilities for 60–90 days. But the aggressor country, on the contrary, intensified hostilities on the front, while emphasizing the “illegitimacy” of V. Zelenskyy.

At the same time, it is not difficult to predict that, in the event of an end to the war and the introduction of electoral processes in Ukraine, Russia will make maximum use of such a situation for: a) large-scale armed provocations, proxy interventions to disrupt the elections; b) total hybrid interference in the election process, exporting chaos and instability, and attempting to bring a pro-Russian puppet government to power. Obviously, the elections issue must not be used as a lever of ultimatum pressure on Kyiv. The Ukrainian authorities and citizens alike are interested in holding elections under all the necessary conditions and in line with European norms and standards. Ukraine’s steps in this direction will hinge on the prospects for a peaceful settlement.

Most Ukrainian citizens understand these circumstances—according to research conducted by the Razumkov Centre in March 2025, 66.4% expressed a negative attitude toward the idea of holding nationwide elections (presidential or parliamentary) before the end of the war.

**Third. State influence in the information field.** The current media landscape in Ukraine is challenging. Soon after the Russian aggression, the government launched the all-Ukrainian telethon “United News”, whose popularity has been declining recently (Балачук, 2024). This model of bringing together Ukraine’s leading TV channels for joint telecast is already raising questions in the country and from partners. In October 2024, the Media Movement, an

association of leading media outlets, issued a statement regarding “attempts by the authorities to create a single controlled narrative, which limits critical analysis and diversity of opinion in the information space of Ukraine” (Protz, 2024). At the same time, the European Commission’s EU Enlargement Package Report (October 2024) criticised the telethon and noted that “it is worth reconsidering whether this is the best platform for free discussion” (Sydorenko and Diakonok, 2024).

While this argument is compelling, it should also be borne in mind that, amidst colossal and extremely dangerous misinformation by Russia, certain state control in the information sphere is a needed and temporary measure. All European countries were exposed to the Kremlin’s dangerous information interventions, with recent elections in Moldova and Georgia being the best examples of such aggressive hybrid influence. Unfortunately, the EU’s current instruments to counter Russian propaganda are not effective enough and operate exclusively in a defensive mode.

The East StratCom Task Force, established in 2014, was specifically designed to detect disinformation. To counter external influences, the EU also created the Rapid Alert System (RAS), established a dedicated Information Sharing and Analysis Centre (ISAC), and adopted the Digital Services Act and the Code of Practice on Disinformation (European Union Agency for Cybersecurity, n.d.). All of these are essential components of the EU protection system currently underway against the hybrid warfare (EU Delegation to Ukraine, 2024). At the same time, there is no single pan-European strategy for promoting soft power or exporting narratives towards Russia. On January 28 2025, speaking at a meeting of the EP Committee on Hybrid Warfare, NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General James Appathurai said that Europe needed to get out of its “boiling frog” mentality and that it was time to shift to “wartime mindset” (Interfax Ukraine, 2025). Ensuring freedom of speech is undoubtedly a key component of countering Russian misinformation campaigns, which have recently been intensifying and improving.

**Fourth. Civil society and religion.** In addition to its media space expansion, Russia is trying to leverage civil society institutions to promote its ideologies and propaganda narratives.

According to the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), since the beginning of the invasion, Ukraine has halted 19 pro-Russian political parties engaged in subversive activities. In June 2024, the Administrative Court of Appeal upheld the Ministry of Justice’s claim to ban the “Nash Krai” (Our Land) political party after SBU findings confirmed that party functionaries spread pro-Russian narratives, conducted anti-Ukrainian propaganda, and held various positions in the occupation authorities (Служба безпеки України, 2024).

The Law of Ukraine “On Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Field of Activities of Religious Organisations” entered into force in August, 2024 (Verkhovna Rada, 2024b). Article 3 of this law prohibits activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine on the grounds that this church “is an ideological extension of the regime of the aggressor state, an accomplice to war crimes and crimes against humanity committed on behalf of the Russian Federation”. As part of the implementation of this law, on July 17, 2025, the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience issued a written request to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) to eliminate the

identified signs of affiliation with the Russian Orthodox Church. Due to failure to comply with these requirements, on September 2, 2025, the State Service filed a lawsuit to terminate the activities of the UOC MP (i.e., to deprive it of its legal entity status and lose its legal capacity). Since February 2022, the SBU has initiated criminal cases against more than 100 priests of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate for collaboration, justification of aggression, high treason, assistance to the occupying country, etc (Гончаренко, 2024).

Other unfavourable factors of wartime can be added to the above-mentioned problems. These include the weakening of public control mechanisms over the actions of the authorities. In turn, there is a concentration of power in the Office of the President, which influences all branches of government. The Verkhovna Rada and the Cabinet of Ministers have weakened their position in relations with the President of Ukraine. There are tendencies to level political competition, with political parties now focusing mainly on assisting the Armed Forces, volunteer activities, and helping citizens affected by the war. A common problem for government institutions is a “staff shortage.”

When outlining wartime challenges, it is necessary to mention the relevance of democratisation and judicial reform. Ukraine is now experiencing staffing problems at various levels of the state apparatus; in the judiciary, according to some estimates, 22% to 61% of judge positions are vacant, depending on the specialisation (Pohorilov, 2024). The low level of trust in state institutions, namely the Cabinet, the Verkhovna Rada, and the courts, is quite worrisome, especially given the increasing public demand for good governance and tougher fight against corruption (Razumkov Centre, 2025). Thus, reforming the public administration and the judiciary, including the procedure for appointing judges, their professional training and ensuring control over their integrity, is the cornerstone for democratic transformations.

To sum up, the above contradictory trends and challenges in the field of democracy are the downside of the war and the lengthy martial law regime. This is why institutional and legal ‘safeguards’ become important; these include a) further implementation of a set of pre-accession pro-European reforms, including within the framework of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement; b) implementation of the European Commission’s recommendations in the 2024 EU Enlargement Package and the Ukraine Facility Programme; c) implementation of the results of screening sessions on the compliance of Ukrainian legislation with EU law in the legislative sphere; and d) implementation of roadmaps for the establishment of the rule of law, functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration reform.

An additional powerful incentive is that the first negotiation cluster that Ukraine hopes to open with the EU in 2025 is the Fundamentals of Accession to the EU, which also focuses on fundamental rights and freedoms.

## Geopolitical component

In a broad sense, Ukraine’s choice of a democratic path of development and integration into the European community has a geopolitical dimension. The affirmation of democratic values in state policy and public life is, on the one hand, the means of Ukraine’s self-

identification on the world stage, through joining the European and global community. On the other hand, it is the tool for confronting Russian armed intervention and the hybrid influence of a totalitarian regime. The success of Ukraine's democratic reforms within the framework of its European choice is determined both by the effectiveness of internal transformations and by the ability of Ukraine and the EU to jointly confront external threats against the backdrop of escalating Russian aggression and dangerous polarization of the global community.

In 2024, the EU faced new threats and challenges that have reshaped the nature and direction of its foreign policy, as well as the philosophy, principles, and approach to enlargement. These changes were driven by the sharp confrontation between the collective West and aggressive Russian regime, as well as the growing conflict between the democratic world and a coalition of authoritarian states (China, Russia, North Korea and Iran), which are stepping up their military and political partnership and expanding hybrid aggression around the world. In particular, the results of the BRICS summit (July 6-7, 2025, Brazil) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit (August 31-September 1, China) demonstrate the determined efforts of China and Russia to form an alliance of "non-Western" countries as a geopolitical counterweight to the US and the EU. These developments have coincided with geopolitical turmoil, possible erosion of transatlantic unity with Trump's coming to power in the US, the internationalisation of the Ukraine war, and the breakdown of the international legal system and security institutions.

EU enlargement could be perceived as a means to counter the expansion of autocratic regimes, intensifying the struggle for countries like Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. As a result, Brussels' foreign policy and the EU enlargement process will increasingly be influenced by political and security factors.

**The eastward enlargement now requires Brussels' decisive measures to protect and preserve the Ukrainian, Moldovan and Georgian democracies, which are to be improved and developed. Otherwise, the enlargement process will be limited to the Western Balkans.**

The process of forming a new EU foreign policy is currently underway, especially in the field of security and defence. Trump's policies have forced the EU to adopt a course of minimizing external dependence and achieving defence self-sufficiency. The EU has revised its strategic priorities and introduced large-scale reforms, primarily in the field of security. In particular, a new defence strategy has been adopted—the White Paper on European Defence—Readiness 2030, a five-stage plan to Rearm Europe (European Commission, 2025). The European Commission has made large-scale investments in the European Defence Fund. In May 2025, the EU unveiled a new Black Sea Strategy with the aim of strengthening security and stability in the region.

The course towards Europe's geopolitical self-identification and consolidation in the face of Russian aggression was developed and specified in the annual address by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, "State of the Union 2025," on September 10, 2025.

Two trends are important in this context. First, the dynamics in Ukraine largely determine Brussels' future security policy. Second, Ukraine has become the epicentre of the confrontation between global forces on the European continent, and this determines the importance of its EU integration.

Following Russia's invasion, the EU's policy towards Ukraine has changed, especially the scale, nature, and focus of financial support. **Now, the focus is on the military, financial, and economic defence of Ukrainian democracy.** As of September 2025, the total amount of aid provided by the EU and its member states to Ukraine since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion amounted to around €177,5 billion, including more than €60 billion in military support (European Council, 2025).

Military spending accounted for the lion's share of Ukraine's budget in 2024. President Zelenskyy said that, in 2024, the funding of Ukraine's defence forces reached \$100 billion. Of this amount, \$40 billion came from Ukraine, \$35 billion was provided by the United States, and \$25 billion by the EU.

In a broad sense, the EU's comprehensive support helps Ukraine maintain its internal political, economic, and social stability, and thus the sustainability of democratic institutions and ability to advance pro-European reforms. This includes a wide range of EU's solidarity actions, ranging from the introduction of a liberal trade regime to the use of Solidarity Lanes logistics to minimise the Russian transport blockade.

The EU Military Assistance Mission to Ukraine (*EUMAM Ukraine*) is a separate area of activity. The mission provides special training for the Armed Forces of Ukraine and coordinates efforts of participating states. In Germany alone, ten countries are working together on this project. It includes basic training for recruits, the use of Western weapons, and the training of trainers, commanders, medical, and engineering personnel (Information Agency of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2023). To date, about 60,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been trained under the EUMAM.

EU's critical assistance in restoring the Ukrainian energy sector – destroyed by Russian aggressors – and its humanitarian support are also worth mentioning. More information on this can be found in Annex III.

**Impact of Russian aggression & geopolitical factors.** The full-scale war against Ukraine aims at destroying its statehood and national identity. Russia is waging total terror against civilians in a policy of physical destruction that may be labelled as genocide. The Russian aggression has affected the nature of Ukraine's progress towards a united Europe and determined the peculiarities of "wartime" European integration. Kyiv has to devote enormous political, diplomatic, financial, economic, and human resources on countering Russian intervention. Amidst the ongoing "war of attrition" and given the limited domestic resources, European integration had to be implemented on a reduced scale. Moreover, the war has complicated pro-European transformations (including the implementation of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement) and reduced European business partners' activities in building contacts with the warring country.

Russia, as a totalitarian police state with its repressive domestic rule and aggressive foreign policy, is a civilisational challenge and a strategic threat to Europe and the world. In Europe, the Kremlin pursues hybrid expansion, which includes, among others, forceful “testing” of the EU borders; interfering in internal political processes; instigating migration crises; waging massive cyberattacks; organising provocations at military facilities; supporting right-wing radical and nationalist movements; conducting espionage, sabotage and subversion activities, and so on.

In September, a new “forceful” phase of Russian hybrid aggression began – an invasion of the EU countries’ airspace.

The war de facto produced a new quality of partnership between Kyiv and Brussels, accelerating Ukraine’s European integration processes and contributing to its pro-European unity. The war consolidated positions of the government and society, making European integration a driving public idea and an important motivation to oppose Russia. Accordingly, there is a growing public demand for the rule of law, human rights and freedoms, even in wartime. Furthermore, the development of civil society and democratic institutions in Ukraine is a factor in ensuring lasting immunity from the aggressor’s hybrid influence, which will continue even after the end of the war. Understanding the nature of Putin’s regime, it is reasonable to assume that a hypothetical cessation of hostilities on the 1,300-kilometre-long front line would mean the shift from the “hot” war into a hybrid one, where Russia would use all available means of influence. Therefore, the sustainability of democracy in Ukraine is vital. Moreover, the long war with Russia and extensive examples of its police dictatorship in the occupied territories have planted strong demand for democratic freedoms in Ukrainian society.

The significance of protecting and consolidating democratic principles in Ukraine should be viewed in the broader context of polarisation: the global divide – ideological, civilisational, and value-based – between Western democracies and authoritarian countries (Russia, China, North Korea, Belarus, Iran). This makes the Ukraine war a piece of a puzzle in the global confrontation along the democracy-authoritarianism line, which will further determine the peculiarities and dynamics of global trends, with military and security factor becoming crucial.

### EU-Ukraine: realities and compromises in the new environment

As noted above, currently, in the conditions of global confrontation on the level of democracy-authoritarianism, the EU is the only global centre for the protection and promotion of democratic values on the global stage. In view of this, the expansion of the European Union, firstly, aims at a “soft” expansion of general democratic world values on the continental space that is vitally important for Brussels. Secondly, the integration of new members contains a security component in view of the large-scale war on the European continent. In this context, Ukraine’s European integration is a component of global and regional processes that affect the nature and specificity of the partnership between Kyiv and Brussels. Therefore, European integration has acquired special importance and significance for Ukraine due to the following circumstances.

European integration has become particularly important and significant for Ukraine in view of the following circumstances. **First. The deterioration of US-EU relations.** The commercialisation of the US partnership with its European allies, including Ukraine, has been accompanied by uncertainty and impulsiveness in dialogue. US-EU economic relations have become more complicated against the backdrop of American tariff pressure. Washington is gradually shifting responsibility for military and financial support for Kyiv and ending the war in Ukraine to Europe. Such a change in geopolitical orientations, distancing from the problems of Europe, and commercialization of Washington's foreign policy were declared in the new US National Security Strategy (November 2025).

**Secondly. The devaluation of the system of fundamental Euro-Atlantic values.** The terms «collective West» and «Euro-Atlantic solidarity» have gradually lost their meaning and significance. A landmark moment was the resonant speech by US Vice President J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference (February 2025). The laconic communiqué of the NATO summit in The Hague should rather be perceived as the result of the diplomatic skill of the Alliance's leadership and a forced compromise.

**Third. The United States' refusal to promote and defend democracy globally.** After the liquidation of USAID), Washington continued the process of curtailing its «soft» influence in the world. This involves curtailing funding for Voice of America and Radio Liberty, as well as limiting support for nearly 20 international programmes. In a speech at West Point on May 24, Donald Trump stated that the US military would not fight for freedom and democracy in other countries. In July-August 2025, the American side unilaterally and sharply reduced budget expenditures on humanitarian aid programmes, UN peacekeeping operations, and initiatives to support democratic processes in various countries.

In this context, the EU remains the only global centre for supporting and promoting democracy, freedom, and human rights, i.e. fundamental, universal values. By and large, we are talking about the EU's global, civilisational mission in the new world reality.

**Fourth. The palliative nature and uncertainty of peace negotiations.** For a long time, Trump's calls and numerous «deadlines» for ending the war only encouraged Russia to escalate hostilities. Moscow turned the negotiation process into a farce, a «smokescreen» for escalating hostilities on the front lines and increasing terror against the civilian population of Ukraine. During the Russian-American summit in Alaska, the EU's common position was in fact ignored. And the subsequent multilateral meeting of a group of European leaders and the President of Ukraine with Trump did not influence the position of official Washington.

Therefore, the turbulent geopolitical changes both in Europe and the world necessitate adequate EU rethinking of its own foreign policy positioning, including the enlargement. There is a need for a reasonable and acceptable compromise between the EU's current security interests and the overall, often subjective requirements of EU member states regarding the level, depth, and adequacy of democratic transformations in Ukraine.

The compromise between operational security interests and strategic plans for democratisation in Ukraine will involve ensuring a transparent and intensive negotiation process of

Ukraine’s EU accession, including the opening of all negotiation clusters in 2025. Additionally, the EU should offer practical – expert, institutional, organisational, and financial – support for democratic transformations in Ukraine.

The EU’s wide range of tools to stimulate reforms, including within the negotiation framework, will be quite effective given Ukraine’s growing critical dependence on EU assistance. Monitoring, coupled with rehabilitation measures in case of a slowdown in the pace of reforms, has already been tested in Ukraine. At the same time, it would be expedient to ensure maximum publicity of negotiations and scale up the involvement and role of Ukrainian civic institutions in the integration process.

While at war, Ukraine is paying too high a price for its European inspirations and has no time for stagnant Balkan-style negotiations and a multi-year period of opening all negotiating chapters. However, despite all the difficulties of the war and post-war period, the main criterion for Ukraine’s “turbo mode” of reforms should be to ensure the sustainability of democratic changes at the macro and micro levels. There is enough time for this, as the “democratic” cluster in the accession negotiations is the last one to close.

### Conclusion

The full-fledged war accelerated Ukraine’s path towards the EU, consolidated its pro-European unity, and increased public demand for democratic norms. The Brussels-Kyiv partnership gained a new dimension focused on joining forces against Russia’s aggression.

The further development of the European community largely depends on the situation on the Ukraine-Russia front. This determines the strategic importance and geopolitical significance of Ukrainian European integration.

Ukraine’s “wartime” European integration has its own peculiarities. The country is implementing democratic reforms while the ongoing conflict and resulting martial law pose various challenges, including the impossibility of holding elections and the temporary derogation from some international democratic commitments. This increases the importance of institutional and legal ‘safeguards’, such as stronger pro-European reforms in the rule of law and the protection of human rights and freedoms.

Given the US’s distancing from European problems, it is the European vector that is becoming strategically important for Ukraine. This refers to political solidarity and military, financial and economic assistance in countering Russian intervention. The key factor is the formation of real security guarantees for Ukraine, its participation in EU defence programmes, and the accelerated integration of the Ukrainian military-industrial complex into European defence industries.

It is obvious that the prospects and fate of Ukrainian democracy (and statehood in general) to a decisive extent depend on the political, military-financial, and economic support of the EU in confronting Russian intervention. In this context, Ukraine’s active participation in EU defense programmes and projects, and the forced integration of the Ukrainian military-industrial complex into the defense industries of Europe is an important factor.

During the long Russian aggression, which has acquired signs of genocide, Ukrainian civil society has expanded the sector of non-governmental institutions, initiated a large-scale volunteer movement, and preserved the potential for self-organization, stability, and viability. There is a growing demand in society for the acceleration of democratic reforms in various areas.

In the conditions of war, the prospects for the end of which are currently uncertain, ensuring the foundations of Ukraine's democratic stability and the irreversibility of pro-European reforms, primarily in the areas of the rule of law, the judicial system, public governance, and the protection of human rights, even in conditions of martial law, is of strategic importance. In Ukraine, there is a broad public consensus on the need for certain restrictions on democratic freedoms. Citizens are aware of the necessity of such a regime, but this regime, on the one hand, should not become an entrenched political practice. On the other hand, it should not be a justification for departing from the democratic course.

In this context, EU support for civil society in Ukraine, as well as EU monitoring and response to internal processes in Ukraine, is of strategic importance. This involves synergizing the efforts of the EU, civil society organisations, and the Ukrainian authorities to protect and develop democratic processes in the context of war.

In turn, it is politically and morally important to open official negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the EU and implement negotiation tasks in a cluster on fundamental democratic issues.

Ukraine's trajectory thus exemplifies wartime hybridization: Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion has catalyzed an adaptive form of democratization, wherein the EU's Ukraine Facility supports both security imperatives and institutional reforms, complemented by societal resilience manifest in volunteer auditors ensuring wartime accountability. Yet this model harbors critical vulnerabilities: martial law's indefinite suspension of elections risks entrenching executive dominance and patronage networks; wartime securitization may erode media pluralism and judicial independence under anti-corruption fatigue; and post-conflict decompression remains precarious, as societal cohesion could fracture amid reconstruction inequities or Russian revanchism.

In contrast to Georgia's securitized hollowing and akin to Moldova's consolidation under lower-intensity pressures, Ukraine's advances are provisional. EU policy must therefore prioritize robust safeguards – phased electoral restoration with international observation, independent pluralism audits, and security agreements embedding stringent reform conditionality – to avert reversion and transform wartime hybridization into enduring democratic consolidation.

## Annex I EU-Ukraine Cooperation Frameworks

<p><b>Partnership and Cooperation Agreement</b> (June 1994).</p>	<p>The document contained no prospects for EU membership and had limited financial support. The agreement initiated pro-European democratic transformations in Ukraine. However, the reforms produced mostly limited results due to the difficult political, social, and economic situation in Ukraine, the resistance of the former nomenklatura, the inertia of post-Soviet psychology, the opportunistic interests of oligarchic groups, and the pro-Russian orientation of large parts of the population.</p>
<p><b>European Council Common Strategy on Ukraine</b> (December 1999).</p>	<p>The European Union recognised Kyiv's European choice and declared its readiness to support political and economic transformations in Ukraine, including strengthening of democracy, the rule of law and public institutions.</p>
<p><b>The EU-Ukraine Action Plan</b> (February 2005)</p>	<p>It was a short-term framework programme that did not match to Ukraine's strategic ambitions generated by the Orange Revolution. The section "Strengthening the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms" was implemented partially, whereas the issues of improving the legislation on public associations, access to public information, protection of media freedom, protection of personal data and many others remained relevant.</p>
<p><b>Eastern Partnership</b> (2009)</p>	<p>This project was a soft power instrument in the Eastern Dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The project was aimed at promoting pro-European reforms in the participating countries and introducing multilateral cooperation at various levels. Subsequently, the Eastern Partnership lost its relevance for many internal and external reasons.</p>
<p><b>EU-Ukraine Association Agreement</b> (2017)</p>	<p>The current agreement has become a comprehensive roadmap for internal reforms, including in the area of democracy. At the same time, the agreement: a) did not provide for Ukraine's membership prospects; b) required updating already at the time of its entry into force; c) presented only general framework theses on the democratisation process (Title 2 "Political Dialogue", Article 4; Title 3 "Justice, Freedom and Security", Articles 14-19) with no corresponding plans and specific tasks.</p>

Table 2 EU-Ukraine Cooperation Frameworks

## Annex II Ukrainian public support for democracy and the European Union

- In June 2010, only 51.7% of Ukrainians believed that democracy was the most desirable type of government system for Ukraine. In May 2023, this figure increased to 73.1%. During the same period, the importance of living in a democratic country has increased from 7.3 to 8.3 points on a ten-point scale.
- In June 2021, 62% of Ukrainians felt more or less free, and in May 2023, this figure grew to 84%.
- In May 2023, 67% of Ukrainians believed that their country was not yet a fully democratic state but was moving towards democracy.
- In May 2025, 61.2% of Ukrainians believed that democracy was the most desirable type of government. Moreover, 57.2% noted that the European model of social development was the most attractive. At the same time, 20.7% of respondents emphasized that Ukraine is a fully democratic state, while 48.3% noted that Ukraine is not yet a fully democratic state but is moving in the direction of democracy.

There is a stable upward trend in public support for Ukraine's EU accession. In March 2021, 59% of Ukrainians believed that the country should join the EU, with the share of supporters rising to 79% in October 2022 and to 84% in January 2024. If a referendum on EU accession were held in Ukraine in September 2024, 81% of citizens would take part in it, of whom 88% would vote (Razumkov Centre, 2025).

## 5 Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

This comparative analysis concludes the InvigoratEU WP4 deliverable by synthesising findings from the accession trio – Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – through the lens of Task 4.1's conceptual framework. Task 4.1 operationalises democratisation as a multi-level interplay of international (e.g., EU conditionality), regional (e.g., Russian hybrid threats), state (e.g., institutional reforms), and societal (e.g., civil society agency) factors, specifically tailored to conflict and post-conflict environments. This approach moves beyond traditional models focused on peaceful transitions, revealing how geopolitical pressures in the Eastern Neighbourhood generate distinctive patterns of democratic resilience. By extracting three novel democratisation models – *securitised hollowing* (Georgia), *hybrid consolidation* (Moldova), and *wartime hybridisation* (Ukraine) – the analysis delivers Objective 4.1 (O4.1): innovative perspectives on democratisation processes amid blockages to democracy, stability, and resilience.

### Georgia: Securitised Hollowing and the Societal Counterbalance Model

Georgia's trajectory illustrates *securitised hollowing*, where EU leverage confronts entrenched Russian influence but inadvertently enables democratic erosion. Since 2019, Georgia's Freedom House score declined from 64 to 58, reflecting backsliding in political pluralism, media freedom, and judicial independence amid the Georgian Dream government's crackdown on protests. Russia's 2008 occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (20% of territory) sustains hybrid threats – disinformation, economic coercion – amplifying security narratives that justify authoritarian measures. The EU responded assertively: suspending €121 million in funding tied to 12 reform priorities, freezing candidate status in 2024, and redirecting aid via EED to civil society. Yet state-level capture persists, with "security pretexts" stifling opposition. Task 4.1's innovation – the *societal counterbalance model* – emerges here: vibrant pro-EU youth movements and NGOs act as an autonomous resilience anchor. Despite repression, 80% public support for EU integration (per recent polls) prevents full autocratisation, demonstrating societal factors' primacy when international/regional pressures overwhelm state institutions. This model operationalises democratisation as "hollowing resistance," urging EU strategies to prioritise non-state actors as firewalls against securitised backsliding.

### Moldova: Hybrid Consolidation and Integrated Security–Democracy Coupling

Moldova exemplifies *hybrid consolidation*, incrementally fortifying democracy against frozen conflict and energy weaponisation. Freedom House scores rose from 57 (2018) to 64 (2024), driven by anti-corruption reforms, judicial strengthening, and 70%+ public backing for EU accession despite Transnistria's Russian-backed separatists. Moscow's tactics – gas cut-offs, vote-buying schemes (e.g., 2024 referendum interference) – test resilience, yet President Sandu's PAS government advanced via EU alignment. EU tools proved transformative: €2.2 billion NDICI aid since 2021, €1.9 billion Reform and Growth Facility (2024), and €47 million European Peace Facility (EPF) for hybrid defence. The EU Advisory Mission (EUPM Moldova) uniquely couples security training (cyber resilience, counter-disinformation) with governance reforms, avoiding pluralism erosion. Task 4.1's *integrated security-*

*democracy coupling* innovation reveals how regional factors can be harnessed: conditionality embeds hybrid threat countermeasures within democratic benchmarks, yielding "multitasking" progress. Unlike Georgia's hollowing, Moldova's state-societal synergy – bolstered by civil society energy diversification campaigns – sustains ownership, offering a blueprint for post-conflict incrementalism.

### Ukraine: Wartime Hybridisation and Adaptive Pluralism Framework

Ukraine's case represents *wartime hybridisation*, where full-scale invasion (2022-) paradoxically accelerates democratisation under existential duress. Freedom House scores edged from 59.9 (2018) to 61.2 (2025), with 74% EU support amid martial law suspending elections. Russian aggression – hybrid prelude to invasion – galvanised societal cohesion, yet challenges anti-corruption sustainment and media pluralism. The €50 billion Ukraine Facility (2024–2027) fuses reconstruction, military aid (EPF), and reforms, complemented by EED civil society channels. Task 4.1's *adaptive wartime pluralism framework* innovates by blending top-down EU conditionality (judicial benchmarks) with bottom-up mobilisation: volunteer networks audit aid, sustaining accountability despite no polls. This "hybridisation" balances security imperatives with societal ownership, contrasting Georgia's state failure and echoing Moldova's coupling – but under acute war. Insights: crises fast-track reforms when publics "own" them, but require safeguards against over-securitisation.

### Policy Recommendations

Building on InvigoratEU's innovative democratization models and synthesizing case-specific insights from Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, these recommendations operationalize Task 4.1 for EU policymakers. They address blockages in conflict/post-conflict contexts across the accession trio, prioritizing adaptive resilience while balancing securitization's benefits with pluralism safeguards. Explicit linkages to the three models ensure targeted application, incorporating empirical lessons like Georgia's civil society crackdowns, Moldova's energy diversification, and Ukraine's wartime volunteer audits.

1. The EU should scale targeted funding for civil society as a democratic bulwark, allocating €100M+ annually through flexible instruments like the EED – **directly countering securitised hollowing by strengthening the societal counterbalance mechanism**, which theoretically activates when state actors exploit securitisation discourse for executive overreach under hybrid pressures. This funding operationalises the model's non-state resilience vector by sustaining horizontal mobilisation (protests, media ecosystems) that maintains pro-EU majorities (>70 percent) despite institutional erosion, as the pathological dynamic of hollowing risks terminal autocratisation without such autonomous agency. This redirects 30–40 percent of NDICI/EPF budgets to youth-led NGOs, independent media, and watchdog networks, with rapid-grant mechanisms under 90 days for hybrid threat responses such as disinformation audits and legal aid for activists. Drawing from Georgia's case, where EED channels bypassed government funding freezes (€121M), the EU should prioritize independent media survival amid crackdowns; expand to Moldova's civil society energy campaigns and Ukraine's volunteer organizations auditing wartime

- aid. This funding should be tied to resilience benchmarks like protest turnout (target: 20 percent youth participation) and public trust polls (aim: 70 percent support for the EU), monitored via annual EED reports bypassing autocratic governments. This builds societal ownership, preventing full hollowing as evidenced by Georgia's 80 percent pro-EU sentiment.
2. The EU must implement conflict-sensitive conditionality by embedding resilience benchmarks in Reform/Growth Facilities and **operationalising hybrid consolidation through equilibrium security-democracy coupling**. Regional low-intensity pressures (frozen conflicts, coercion) are transformed via integrated frameworks that fuse hybrid defence with governance benchmarks, yielding multi-level synergies that incrementally professionalise state institutions while societal co-production avoids zero-sum securitisation traps, achieving steady democratic deepening. Traditional metrics falter in war zones, so 40 percent of funding gates on pluralism indicators (media freedom indices, civil society space scores) alongside hybrid resilience measures (cyber defense drills, energy diversification). The Union should develop an EU-wide "Resilience Matrix" for low-intensity contexts like Moldova's Transnistria (countering vote-buying, gas coercion) and high-intensity like Ukraine's wartime audits, with quarterly reviews incorporating local experts. The Ukraine Facility disbursements should be linked to volunteer network audits and post-war election roadmaps, enforcing Ukraine-specific benchmarks like judicial vetting and anti-corruption (e.g., NABU/SAPO independence).
  3. To integrate hybrid threats effectively, the EU should expand EUPM models with mandatory pluralism audits, replicating Moldova's success - **scaling hybrid consolidation tools while preventing securitised hollowing risks**. The Union could deploy missions to Georgia for Abkhazia monitoring, scale Ukraine's assistance with civil society veto rights, and standardize "pluralism clauses" featuring six-month audits (Freedom House/V-Dem) to block media crackdowns. Allocate €200M EPF for trio-wide cyber/media resilience training co-designed with NGOs, incorporating Ukraine's counter-disinformation needs (e.g., telethon reforms) and Moldova's Rapid Alert System enhancements. Balance with Ukraine's martial law derogations by mandating post-war decompression (electoral restoration, minority rights per Rome Statute ratification).
  4. Finally, the EU needs to **sustain enlargement momentum through swift, credible negotiations as a geopolitical signal against spoilers**. Prioritize first-cluster openings (fundamentals: rule of law) by Q2 2026, paired with "trio coordination" summits signaling irreversibility. Adopt unified frameworks via QMV pilots bypassing vetoes (e.g., Hungary), with public diplomacy highlighting 74% Ukraine/70% Moldova EU support. Incorporate Ukraine's security pacts (28 bilateral agreements tying aid to reforms) and Georgia's sanctions advocacy (e.g., Human Rights Regime activation). Scale civil society involvement in negotiations, as Ukraine's 292 public reps in 36 groups exemplify, ensuring post-war media pluralism roadmaps.
  5. Additional case-derived actions include: **energy security for Moldova** (diversification grants to counter Russian leverage); **post-war judicial staffing for**

**Ukraine** (TALEX/Twinning for 22-61% vacancies); **EU-wide sanctions coherence for Georgia** (extending Baltic/US Magnitsky to Union level).

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## About InvigoratEU

InvigoratEU is a Horizon Europe-funded project, coordinated by the EU-Chair at the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) together with the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) in Berlin. The project, with a duration of 3 years from January 2024 until December 2026, examines how the EU can structure its future relations with its Eastern neighbours and the countries of the Western Balkans. The consortium has received around three million euros for this endeavour.

### How can the EU invigorate its enlargement and neighbourhood policy to enhance Europe’s resilience?

**Our first goal** is to investigate how to reform the EU’s enlargement strategy in a new geopolitical phase, HOW TO RESPOND to other actors’ geopolitical ambitions in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans, and HOW TO REBUILD the EU’s foreign policy arsenal in view of a new era of military threats (triple “R” approach) combining the modernisation and geopolitical logics of EU enlargement, leading to new data – e.g. a public opinion survey in Ukraine, a set of scenarios, an external influence index (Russia, China, Turkey), and a social policy compliance and cohesion scoreboard.



**Our second goal** is to elaborate an evidence-based, forward-looking vision for the EU’s political agenda and institutional frameworks for co-designing a multidimensional toolbox (i.e. two tailor-made toolkits), together with InvigoratEU’s Expert Hub, Civil Society (CS) Network, Youth Labs, Workshops for Young Professionals and Policy Debates in a gaming set up, which will result in context-sensitive and actionable policy recommendations for European and national political stakeholders and (young) European citizens in particular.

**Our third goal** is to deploy a CDE (communication, dissemination and exploitation) strategy aiming at recommendations from Day 1 to maximize our scientific, policy and societal impact in invigorating the EU’s enlargement and neighbourhood policies to enhance Europe’s resilience. Ultimately, InvigoratEU is a deliberately large consortium respecting the diversity of Europe and political perspectives; 7 out of 18 are from Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and the western Balkans (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia), complemented by our Civil Society Network of 9 representatives from all Western Balkan countries, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

InvigoratEU is funded by the European Union.

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