



# REDEMOS

RECONFIGURING EU DEMOCRACY  
SUPPORT. TOWARDS A SUSTAINED  
DEMOS IN THE EU'S EASTERN  
NEIGHBOURHOOD

## REDEMOS Report D7.3

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# Understanding coherence in EU democracy promotion in the Eastern Neighbourhood: discursive and relational perspectives

Ivan Gomza, Kyiv School of Economics

Maryna Rabinovych, Kyiv School of Economics

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## Executive Summary

This report provides a synthetic overview of key insights from three REDEMOS working papers, brought together through a shared analytical focus on coherence in EU democracy promotion in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Rather than re-analysing primary data, the report adopts an approach of analytical synthesis, using coherence as a common reference point to identify patterns of alignment and tension across studies that differ in conceptual focus and methodology.

The three papers are deliberately sequenced to capture the layered nature of coherence. The analysis begins with the reflexive dimension of EU democracy promotion, examining how EU officials' perceptions of the Union's external image shape preferences for instruments and modes of engagement. It then turns to the discursive dimension, analysing how democracy is articulated, adapted, or contested in interactions between EU actors and counterparts in the EN region. Finally, it situates these dynamics within a broader context of external normative contestation, focusing on how Russia and China advance alternative narratives that challenge the EU's democratic framing.

Taken together, the findings show that **coherence in EU democracy promotion is neither uniform nor static**. While EU democracy discourse remains relatively stable and codified at the institutional level, coherence becomes more uneven as this discourse travels across contexts and actors. Civil society organisations often act as important carriers and innovators of democratic meanings, while official discourses in partner countries display greater selectivity and instrumentalisation. External contestation further complicates coherence by exploiting existing ambiguities and by linking democracy promotion to broader geopolitical and security concerns.

Overall, the report conceptualises coherence not as a condition that can be fully achieved, but as a **relational and dynamic property of EU democracy promotion**, shaped by reflexivity, interaction, and contestation. Understanding coherence in this way helps explain both the resilience and the limits of EU democracy promotion in a contested neighbourhood and highlights the importance of engagement, adaptability, and credibility alongside normative consistency.

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## List of Abbreviations

EEAS –European Union External Action Service  
EN – Eastern Neighbourhood  
EU – European Union  
NGO – Non-governmental Organisation  
PCD – Policy Coherence for Development  
PCSD – Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development  
SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals  
SEA – Single European Act  
TEU – Treaty on the European Union  
TFEU – Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

# 1 Introduction

Democracy promotion has been widely recognised as a central element of the European Union's external action, particularly in its policies vis-à-vis the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) countries. Research on EU democracy promotion in the EN region has predominantly focused on the design and effectiveness of EU instruments (e.g. Schimmelfennig and Kakhishvili 2024; Solander 2025), with particular attention to conditionality mechanisms, reform dynamics within partner countries, and elite-level interactions. Yet the confluence of intensifying geopolitical competition, marked by deepening ideological divides among powers seeking greater influence, and the rapid rise of digital technologies makes it particularly important to approach democracy and its promotion from a discursive perspective. This includes examining democracy discourses articulated by both the EU and EN countries as crucial targets of EU democracy promotion, as well as perceptions and images of the EU as a democracy supporter, and how these unfold against the backdrop of, and interact with, narratives promoted by contending powers such as Russia and China.

The key objective of this report is to assess the coherence of democracy discourses articulated by the EU and EN countries and to examine the evolving image of the EU as a democracy supporter, situating these dynamics against the backdrop of competing narratives advanced by Russia and China as key normative contenders in the region. In so doing, the report employs the concept of coherence as an analytical lens to synthesise and summarise the key findings of three deliverables produced within REDEMOS Work Package 7, which is dedicated to discourses, narratives, and perceptions of EU democracy promotion in the EN region. Specifically, Working Paper D7.4 examines EU understandings of its image as a norms supporter and their relevance for EU policies (Freyburg, et al. 2025); Working Paper D7.1 focuses on democracy discourses in the EU and EN countries (Gomza, et al., 2025); and Working Paper D7.2 zooms in on the narratives advanced by external normative contenders (Raik, et al. 2024).

For the purposes of this report, coherence is understood not as a fixed attribute of EU democracy promotion, but as a discursive and relational quality that emerges through ongoing interactions between democracy discourses articulated by the EU and those of EN countries, shaped by the EU's self-perceptions as a democracy supporter and by narratives advanced by external normative contenders. While building on established literature on coherence in EU external action (e.g. Portela 2021; Damro, et al. 2025), the report introduces a distinction between discursive and relational coherence. Discursive coherence refers to the consistency and compatibility of democracy-related meanings and frames articulated by the EU, including those developed in dialogue with EN actors and evolving EU self-understandings as a democracy supporter. Consonant with the relational perspective on the EU foreign policy and, most recently, enlargement (e.g. Petrova and Baranzini 2025; Slootmaeckers 2025), relational coherence, by contrast, captures how these discourses are negotiated and sustained through interaction, including the extent to which they resonate with, are contested by, or adapt to competing narratives promoted by external normative contenders. In combination, these perspectives are well suited to analysing EU democracy promotion in an environment shaped by an intensifying "battle of narratives" among geopolitical actors and, echoing the arguments of the former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, by growing calls for the EU to adopt a more assertive stance in order to effectively articulate, defend, and communicate its normative position (Borrell 2022).

Another crucial practical reason for centring coherence is that it provides a common analytical denominator for synthesising the results of three independent research outputs, each of which has employed distinct theoretical lenses and approaches to research design. Working Paper D7.4 conceptualises foreign policy-making as a reflexive process shaped by reputational standing and employs a combination of a modernised Q methodology and survey data to examine how EU representatives construe the Union's external image and how these perceptions inform their diplomatic preferences.

Working Paper D7.1 develops a theoretical framework that bridges discourse analysis and the literature on norm diffusion. It analyses texts produced by symbolic elites in the EU and three EN countries, namely, Ukraine, Belarus, and Armenia, selected to illustrate divergent political regimes and differing trajectories of relations with the EU, as well as with Russia and China as its key normative competitors in the region.

Finally, Working Paper D7.2 unpacks democracy narratives advanced by Russia and China, understood as “sets of meanings that organise events and experiences and make sense of them,” drawing on qualitative content analysis of digital media outlets and expert interviews (Raik, et al. 2024, 6).

By employing the coherence lens to bring into dialogue research on democracy discourses, perceptions, and competing narratives in the EN region, the report identifies three key challenges facing EU democracy promotion from the perspective of coherence. First, (in)coherence in EU democracy promotion is deeply relational in nature, emerging through interactions between EU actors, EN counterparts, and external normative contenders rather than from the internal consistency of EU policies alone. Second, coherence is constrained by persistent gaps between the EU’s self-image as a democracy supporter and how this role is perceived externally, resulting in tensions that limit the resonance and credibility of EU democracy promotion in the EN region. Third, these challenges are further exacerbated by the active presence of competing narratives advanced by Russia and China, which promote alternative normative frameworks and interpretations of democracy, thereby intensifying discursive contestation and further fragmenting the environment in which EU democracy promotion unfolds.

The analysed REDEMOS deliverables propose a range of solutions to these challenges, prominently centred on placing local populations in EN countries—the *demos*—at the core of EU democracy promotion efforts. This includes support for local discursive innovations as expressions of democratic ownership, as well as a greater emphasis on engagement-oriented instruments, such as technical assistance, high-level political engagement, and membership-related incentives, rather than predominantly one-sided diplomatic signalling. The findings also point to the need for tools capable of distinguishing between discursive compliance and genuine democratic commitment in the EN region. Equally important is the establishment of platforms for transnational discursive exchange, which can facilitate dialogue across societal and political levels and contribute to strengthening relational coherence in a contested normative environment.

## 2 Coherence in EU External Democracy Promotion

Although the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 granted the EU a single legal personality and a unified set of principles and objectives, the Union’s structural complexity largely persisted (Cremona 2008). This persistence, together with concrete instances of incoherence in EU foreign policy practice over the following decade, such as the unilateral military intervention by the UK and France in Libya in 2011, the weak and fragmented response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea and aggression in eastern Ukraine in 2014, and the lack of a common stance on the Nord Stream energy project, has sustained the centrality of coherence as a key concern in both scholarly and policy debates on EU external action (Gatti 2016, 10-12). While the Treaties extensively call for “consistency” in EU foreign policy—for example, in Article 21(3) TEU, which stipulates the objectives of EU external action, and Article 7 TFEU, which belongs to the provisions of general application—these provisions neither explicitly define the term nor specify how “consistency” relates to “coherence,” despite the latter’s widespread use in EU policy discourse (European Union, 2012b; 2012a; Gatti 2016). Moreover, these terms are often used interchangeably, arguably due to variations in translation across different EU languages (Gebhard 2017), which further complicates efforts to grasp the substantive meaning of each concept and their interplay.

Against this background, it is not surprising that extensive research has been dedicated to understanding coherence in EU external action, both in broad terms and as manifested in specific policy domains (e.g. Blockmans and Laatsit 2012; Portela and Orbie 2015; Gebhard 2017). Commonly, especially the former, more general studies zoom in on the roots of “coherence,” tracing them back to the creation of European Political Cooperation (EPC) in the 1970s and its subsequent formalisation with the Single European Act (SEA) in 1987 (e.g. Gebhard 2017). Looking back to the period preceding the launch of the EPC, Gebhard (2017) associates the idea of coherence with political solidarity and with the benefits that states could derive from cooperating in specific areas of foreign policy. Subsequently, in her analysis of the Single European Act (SEA), Tovar Velasco (2021) conceptualises the launch of the EPC as the creation of three interplaying imaginary communities: (i) a *community of information*, aimed at sharing positions and information among European

Union (EU) Member States; (ii) a *community of vision*, intended to foster shared views and common positions on specific issues or events; and (iii) a *community of action*, oriented towards acting collectively as a single unit. The establishment and effective functioning of these communities can be seen as foundational for coherence in EU external action, both in broad terms and across specific geographical and thematic policy areas (*Ibid*).

Another way to conceptualise “coherence”, while also distinguishing it from “consistency”, is through a three-pillar framework. First, coherence requires **vertical consistency**, which refers to the alignment between the actions and policies of EU-level institutions, such as the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS), and those of individual Member States. This entails ensuring that national foreign policies support agreed EU positions, avoiding contradictory signals, and strengthening the Union’s capacity to act collectively on the global stage by effectively “speaking with one voice” (Tovar Velasco, 2021; Macaj and Nicolaïdis 2015). Second, horizontal coherence is required between the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and other dimensions of EU external action (Tovar Velasco, 2021). This aspect is associated with the need to ensure that different policy objectives, policy areas, and instruments, such as security, enlargement, trade, or development, are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory. **Horizontal coherence** has acquired particular salience in the context of EU development policy, most notably in the form of Policy Coherence for Development (PCD), which seeks to ensure that non-development policies do not undermine development objectives, and, as further articulated in the framework of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD), that EU policies contribute in a mutually reinforcing manner to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Pichon 2023).

Both dimensions are applicable to EU democracy promotion, understood as a cross-cutting external policy domain that brings together the efforts of EU institutions, Member States, and non-governmental actors aimed at creating, supporting, and legitimising democratic norms and practices, in our case, in the EN region. In this context, the vertical dimension relates to the extent to which EU-level democracy promotion objectives, policies, and practices are aligned with those of individual EU Member States engaging bilaterally with the same partner countries. In turn, horizontal coherence reflects the compatibility of democracy promotion with other EU policy priorities, such as security, development, enlargement, and economic cooperation.

The importance of addressing both dimensions in EU engagement with the EN region can be substantiated with reference to two dilemmas that the EU and its Member States encounter in their respective efforts. First, the well-known and extensively documented *democracy–stability dilemma* refers to the tension between promoting democratic reforms and maintaining political stability in partner countries, particularly in contexts characterised by authoritarian governance and/or security concerns, such as in case of Belarus (Leukavets 2025; Weilandt 2025). Second, in the context of a possible next wave of enlargement driven by geopolitical considerations, the EU may face a dilemma between strategic and security-focused imperatives on the one hand, and merit-based approaches to enlargement, grounded in democratic conditionality and reform performance, on the other, with potential implications for the coherence of EU democracy promotion efforts (e.g. Zeneli 2025). Although there is currently a broad consensus that geopolitical urgency should not overshadow a rigorous and nuanced assessment of candidate countries’ reform achievements, the *geopolitics–merit dilemma* poses a particular challenge for vertical consistency. This is because EU Member States are unevenly exposed to security threats emanating from Russia and therefore perceive geopolitical urgency differently (e.g. Kauffmann 2026).

These dilemmas do not only pose challenges for institutional coordination and policy alignment but also have considerable discursive and relational implications. Divergent strategic priorities among EU institutions and Member States have the potential to translate into differing narratives about democracy, security, and enlargement, which shape how these policies are articulated and interpreted by partner countries in the EN region, as well as by external normative contenders such as Russia and China. In this sense, coherence emerges not only as a matter of aligning institutional positions and minimising contradictions between policies, but also of maintaining a stable and intelligible democracy discourse and, within that, articulating narratives that are consistent, credible, and recognizable across different audiences and contexts. Amid the



unfolding “battle of narratives” (European Union External Action Service 2023), discursive incoherence becomes particularly consequential, as fragmented or ambiguous democracy narratives weaken the EU’s ability to communicate its normative commitments, undermine its credibility as a democracy supporter, and create opportunities for competing actors to challenge, reinterpret, or appropriate democratic concepts.

Accordingly, while drawing on established understandings of vertical consistency and horizontal coherence, this paper adopts the concept of **discursive coherence** to capture the extent to which the EU is capable of creating, articulating, and sustaining a stable, intelligible, and credible democracy discourse in interaction with domestic democracy discourses in EN countries and under conditions of intensified contestation, exercised by norm contenders. The idea of discursive coherence is close to that of “community of vision”, discussed by Tovar Velasco (2021), yet it places greater emphasis on how the common vision is communicated and (re)negotiated in the relational realm, including through interaction with EN countries and contestation exercised by external normative contenders. In this light, the notion of discourses refers to “semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world (physical, social, or mental) that can generally be identified with different positions or perspectives of different groups of social actors” (Fairclough 2015, p.13), whilst narratives represent more specific and structured storylines through which these meanings are organised, communicated, and mobilised (Sassatelli 2015). Notably, the EU’s democracy discourse is closely intertwined with the broader discourse through which the EU constructs and communicates its identity as a democracy-promoting actor and, in turn, with its self-understanding as a democracy supporter and normative power in external relations (Freyburg, et al. 2025).

Tightly linked to discursive coherence is the notion of **relational coherence**, which stresses that coherence is not produced unilaterally through discourse articulation alone, but emerges through the EU’s ongoing interaction with both partner countries in the EN region and external normative contenders (Slootmaeckers 2025). Supplementing the discursive perspective with a relational one is important for three reasons. First, it responds to the growing consensus on the deeply political and relational nature of Europeanisation by taking the agency of EU partner countries seriously and by focusing on how EU values, including democracy, are co-constructed, contested, and redefined through ongoing interactions between the EU and partner countries (Slootmaeckers 2025; Petrova and Baranzini 2025). Second, although still underexplored in much of the existing literature, a relational perspective allows for a systematic account of the influence of external normative contenders, including their shifting understandings of their role in the EN region and the discourses and narratives they advance. Third, a relational perspective adds a dynamic dimension to vertical and horizontal understandings of coherence by conceptualising coherence as a fluid property, thereby extending the analysis beyond the EU as a bounded actor and opening up analytical space to examine how coherence is continuously produced, negotiated, and potentially undermined through interaction across multiple levels and actors.

Taken together, this conceptual framework enables the report to synthesise the findings of three REDEMOS working papers, foregrounding coherence not as a static institutional attribute, but as a dynamic and relational process shaped by interaction, the ongoing reshaping of discourses, and narrative contestation in the EN region.

### 3 Methodological Note

As noted in the introduction, this report provides a synthetic overview of the key insights and findings from three working papers produced within the REDEMOS project. These papers examine the EU’s understanding of its image as a norm promoter, democracy discourses in the EU and EN countries, and democracy narratives advanced by external normative contenders, all analysed through the lens of coherence. Taken together, they constitute the conceptual and empirical scaffolding for the meta-analysis of discursive and relational coherence in EU democracy promotion presented in this report.

The sequencing of the papers is deliberate. The report begins with D7.4, which foregrounds the reflexive dimension of EU self-perceptions by analysing how EU officials construe the Union’s external image and how



these perceptions inform diplomatic preferences (Freyburg et al. 2025). It then turns to D7.1, which examines the articulation of democracy discourses across EU and EN actors (Gomza, et al. 2025). Finally, D7.2 situates these dynamics within a contested geopolitical environment shaped by Russia and China by analysing democracy narratives advanced by these external normative contenders (Raik, et al. 2024). This progression from internal reflexivity, through discursive articulation, to external contestation offers a structured pathway into the complexity of coherence.

Rather than re-analysing primary data, the report adopts a method of analytical synthesis, bringing into dialogue the findings of three working papers that draw on different conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches. The concept of coherence, discussed above, thus serves as a shared analytical reference point that enables the identification of patterns of alignment and tension across the studies, while preserving their theoretical and methodological distinctiveness.

D7.4 approaches the study of EU democracy promotion through the lens of reflexivity, focusing on how officials within the Union construe its external image and how these perceptions inform the choice of instruments. Methodologically, it combines a modernised Q-methodology with survey data, enabling both structured comparison and broader attitudinal mapping. In total, 61 EU officials drawn from EU institutions and delegations participated in the survey, which included the Q sorting that allowed to identify distinct ideal types of how the EU's role as a democracy supporter is understood. By examining these understandings, D7.4 demonstrates how reputational concerns shape the choice of instruments, with perceived strength encouraging declaratory signalling and perceived weakness prompting engagement-oriented strategies. In this way, coherence is situated not only in discourse, but also in the reflexive practices of those charged with implementing democracy promotion.

D7.1 employs comparative cross-country discourse analysis informed by norm diffusion theory to examine how democracy is articulated at the level of the EU and in selected EN countries. The study is based on a corpus of 237 texts produced by symbolic elites, including materials from EU institutions, national authorities in Ukraine, Belarus, and Armenia, and civil society organisations engaged in democracy-related issues. The material was analysed through a dual coding procedure, combining quantitative coding of core democratic components with qualitative analysis of framing and interpretation. This design enables systematic comparison between official and societal discourses and across countries with differing political regimes and trajectories of EU engagement. D7.1 thus provides a basis for assessing whether EU democracy discourses are replicated, adapted, or rejected, and for identifying points of convergence and divergence in discursive practice.

D7.2 examines the role of external normative contenders by analysing democracy narratives advanced by Russia and China. Methodologically, the study relies on qualitative content analysis of 180 media articles published across leading Russian and Chinese outlets, complemented by 25 expert interviews conducted in the EN region. The media corpus reflects prominent channels through which these actors disseminate their views, while interviews provide contextual insight into how such narratives are received and interpreted locally. This design allows D7.2 to identify recurring frames portraying EU democracy promotion as interloping, destabilising, or neo-imperialist, and to assess how such narratives challenge the EU's efforts to sustain coherence across different national contexts.

Although each of the three papers adopts a distinct methodological lens, their approaches overlap in ways that strengthen the analytical synthesis pursued in this report. D7.4 captures the reflexive dimension of coherence at the level of EU officials' self-understandings; D7.1 examines coherence as a property of discursive interaction between EU and EN actors; and D7.2 situates both within a broader environment of geopolitical contestation. The sequencing of these perspectives reflects the layered nature of coherence itself, which begins with reflexive self-perceptions, extends into discursive articulation, and is ultimately tested against external normative challenges.

Taken together, the three papers allow coherence to be assessed not as a static attribute, but as a relational and dynamic quality emerging through processes of meaning-making, negotiation, and contestation. By

triangulating attitudinal, discursive, and narrative perspectives, the report provides a multi-layered account of how EU democracy promotion is shaped, sustained, and challenged in the EN region.

## 4 Summarizing the Findings

### 4.1 Reflexivity and Meta-perceptions of the EU's Image

D 7.4. demonstrates that the preference for foreign policy action, including in the domain of democracy promotion is influenced by how EU officials believe the EU is perceived in the EN region (or, in other words, officials' meta-perceptions of the EU's image). Rather than treating democracy support as a fixed policy domain, the findings show that coherence is conditioned by reputational concerns and the strategic calculations they engender (Freyburg, et al. 2025).

The first finding deals with **the diversity of meta-perceptions among EU officials**. Some respondents articulated a confident image of the Union as a credible democracy supporter, emphasising its normative distinctiveness and long-standing commitment to democratic values. Others expressed scepticism, portraying the EU as vulnerable to accusations of inconsistency or hypocrisy. This divergence produced several "ideal types": one group saw the EU as a principled actor whose democracy discourse carries legitimacy; another viewed it as a pragmatic power whose credibility is fragile; a third stressed the Union's dependence on external validation, suggesting that its democracy promotion is only effective when partner countries recognise its authority.

The second finding concerns **the instrumental consequences of these reputational assessments**. Officials who perceived the EU's image as strong tended to favour declaratory instruments, such as public statements, resolutions, and symbolic signalling, arguing that such tools reinforce credibility and consolidate the Union's normative identity. By contrast, officials who assumed reputational weakness preferred engagement-oriented instruments such as dialogue, technical assistance, or capacity-building. Regression analysis confirms this pattern: officials who perceive the EU as weak and inconsistent show markedly lower support for declaratory and unilateral signalling instruments. At the same time, preferences for engagement and incentive-based tools remain stable across all clusters, indicating a broad consensus that cooperative approaches are legitimate regardless of reputational perceptions. Importantly, these patterns are not driven by ideology: neither economic nor cultural orientations predict instrument preferences, underscoring that variation is linked to meta-perceptions rather than left-right or liberal-conservative predispositions.

Thirdly, the paper highlights the **role of reflexivity in sustaining or undermining coherence**. Meta-perceptions act as a cognitive lens, influencing preferences for diplomatic behaviour below the level of formal mandates. Officials repeatedly stressed that democracy promotion cannot be divorced from how the EU is perceived abroad. Some argued that reputational strength allows the Union to act with confidence, sustaining coherence by projecting a stable discourse. Others warned that reputational weakness undermines particularly the discursive dimension of coherence, forcing the EU into defensive strategies that dilute normative clarity. In practice, reputational concerns temper visible, one-sided diplomacy but leave cooperative tools broadly legitimate, ensuring that engagement remains the default mode of action, even under contested conditions.

Finally, the paper grasps the **tension between declaratory and engagement-oriented strategies**. Declaratory instruments were valued for their symbolic power but criticised for limited practical impact. Engagement tools were praised for fostering dialogue but seen as vulnerable to accusations of compromise. This tension reflects a broader dilemma: coherence requires both normative clarity and relational adaptability, yet these qualities are not always compatible.

### 4.2 Discursive Articulations of Democracy in the EU and the EN region

D7.1 reveals a layered and at times contradictory landscape of democracy discourses, in which the European Union's frames are variously replicated, adapted, rejected, and occasionally expanded by actors in the EN

region (Gomza, et al.,2025). The findings highlight the unevenness of discursive coherence and demonstrate how domestic political contexts and external pressures shape the articulation of democracy.

The first finding of this paper concerns the European Union itself. **Symbolic elites display a notable convergence in their democratic discourses**, marked by reliance on formulaic language and a consistent set of normative references. Despite institutional differentiation, each body adapts its discourse to its symbolic role. The European Commission, as supranational norm-maker, emphasises transparency, judicial independence, and the prohibition of executive arbitrariness. The European Parliament, embodying representative democracy, foregrounds fundamental freedoms and electoral rights, often addressing citizens directly. The European Council, reflecting executive authority, employs a multi-dimensional discourse that integrates participatory and egalitarian components to justify democracy aid and institutional reform. Crucially, these discourses are anchored in codified norms, with frequent allusions to association agreements, the Copenhagen criteria, OSCE principles, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, thereby reinforcing consistency between rhetoric and formal political outputs.

The second finding delves into the Eastern Neighbourhood countries, where **systematic divergence between official and civil society discourses is evident**. In Belarus, official discourse rejects EU democracy frames outright, portraying them as destabilising, externally imposed, and incompatible with national sovereignty. Civil society organisations, however, continue to articulate alternative meanings of democracy, predominantly embedding liberal dimensions as forms of resistance to authoritarianism. In Ukraine, official discourse adapts EU frames through securitisation, linking democracy to resilience and sovereignty in the face of external aggression. Civil society actors, by contrast, replicate EU formulations with greater fidelity while also innovating, emphasising participatory and egalitarian dimensions such as digital governance and educational equality. In Armenia, official discourse demonstrates accelerated convergence, increasingly adopting EU frames in the wake of domestic political transformation. Civil society organisations reinforce this trend, replicating EU meanings while expanding them to include inclusivity and social transformation.

The third finding highlights **the striking contrasts in how democratic language is replicated, adapted, innovated, or rejected, showing the diverse trajectories of democratic discourse under different political and geopolitical conditions**.

**Ukraine** stands out as the most dynamic case of replication combined with innovation. Civil society organisations consistently foreground liberal, participatory, and electoral components of democracy, often with greater intensity than EU elites themselves. This reflects both the chronic deficits in rule of law and rights protection and the strategic need to employ EU vocabulary to secure legitimacy. NGOs innovate by expanding democracy to include anti-corruption, decentralisation, e-democracy, and support for internally displaced persons, thereby producing a distinct “Ukrainian variety” of democratic discourse. Official discourse, by contrast, shows selective adaptation. Presidents reproduce EU frames but downplay checks and balances, transparency, and feminist elements. Zelenskyy’s rhetoric initially minimised democracy altogether, reflecting a preference for concentrated control, but wartime conditions prompted renewed emphasis on electoral and egalitarian themes. Ukraine demonstrates how civil society can sustain and expand democratic language even under existential threat, while official actors adapt selectively to political circumstances. The result is a discursive field that remains coherent, resilient, and innovative despite the pressures of war.

**Belarus** represents the opposite extreme, marked by tunnel vision in civil society and topic reversal in official discourse. NGOs, operating under severe repression, concentrate almost exclusively on the liberal component—rule of law, rights protection, and media freedom—while avoiding electoral and participatory references hijacked by the regime. Civil society replicates EU liberal discourse formulaically, with no innovation, enshrining rights language as a defensive credo. Official discourse, however, introduces devious innovations: democracy is invoked as a rhetorical foil, portrayed as chaos, violence, and economic failure. Lukashenka’s speeches link democracy to civil strife, terrorism, and economic decline, weaponising the vocabulary against its own meaning. This inversion produces profound discursive asymmetry: NGOs replicate EU frames defensively, while officials invert them to delegitimise both EU norms and domestic opposition.

Geopolitical shocks, including Russia's covert annexation, produced no discursive change, underscoring the regime's insularity and resistance to norm transfer. Belarus thus exemplifies blocked communication with EU symbolic elites, where civil society clings to liberal formulae while the regime systematically rejects and distorts democratic language.

**Armenia** illustrates oscillation between formalism, revolutionary adaptation, and security-driven instrumentalisation. In 2017, official discourse replicated EU liberal frames instrumentally, signalling conformity while consolidating authority, while civil society adopted a sceptical tone, highlighting electoral manipulation and governance dysfunction. The Velvet Revolution in 2018 transformed discourse: by 2019, official rhetoric emphasised transparency, citizen empowerment, and participatory governance, while civil society shifted to constructive engagement, linking reform to inclusivity, feminist advocacy, and cautious electoral optimism. By 2024, geopolitical shocks, especially Russia's invasion of Ukraine, forced official discourse to instrumentalise democracy as a tool for peace, sovereignty, and EU integration, with participatory and feminist elements receding. Civil society, however, remained resilient, sustaining liberal and participatory emphases, launching pro-European initiatives such as the Eurovote campaign, and fostering inclusive peacebuilding dialogues. NGOs continued to monitor gender equality and promote grassroots dialogue, even as official discourse narrowed under security imperatives. Armenia thus demonstrates how regime change and geopolitical shocks reshape the balance of components, producing a discourse that oscillates between replication, substantive engagement, and instrumental adaptation. Civil society plays a dual role—critical watchdog under authoritarian formalism, constructive partner under revolutionary momentum, and resilient reformist actor under security imperatives.

### 4.3 Competing Narratives in the EN region

D7.2 reveals a discursive battlefield in the eastern neighbourhood where Russia and, to a lesser extent, China, deploy narratives designed to reshape perceptions of democracy, security, and identity. These are not mere rhetorical devices but instruments of influence intended to undermine the Western liberal model and present alternative paths as more natural, secure, or beneficial (Raik, et al. 2024). Comparative analysis across Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan shows that resonance depends less on narrative content than on domestic political and geopolitical conditions.

The first finding is that **Russia's narratives form a coherent architecture built around four mutually reinforcing frames: the decadence of the West, historical unity with Russia, Russia as a security provider, and Western-imposed democracy.** Together they construct a worldview in which Russia appears as guardian of tradition, stability, and sovereignty, while the West is cast as alien, destabilising, and manipulative. The "decadent West" delegitimises liberal values by framing them as corrosive to Orthodox traditions, resonating where religious institutions are influential (Moldova, Georgia) but losing traction where societies mobilise against Russian aggression (Ukraine after 2014). The "historical unity" narrative denies national agency by embedding neighbours into a Russian-centred civilisational frame, embraced uncritically in Belarus but dismantled in Ukraine through proactive resistance. The "Russia provides security" narrative inverts responsibility for conflict, portraying the West as aggressor; its credibility collapsed in Armenia after Russia's failure in the 2020 Karabakh war, while in Georgia ruling elites instrumentalised fear of war spreading. Finally, the "Western-imposed democracy" narrative reframes EU conditionality as interference, resonating where governments seek to delegitimise domestic critics (Georgia) but losing traction where democratic mobilisation is strong (Ukraine, Armenia post-2018). Each frame reinforces the others, producing a discursive ecosystem that delegitimises Western democracy promotion. Yet effectiveness is highly context-dependent: credibility collapses when Russia's actions contradict its claims, but narratives gain traction when domestic elites find utility in amplifying them.

Secondly, it is important to note that the **reception of Russian narratives varies sharply across the six countries**, producing five distinct modes. Belarus absorbed them wholesale, reflecting deep integration with Russia and limited pluralism. Ukraine rejected them, as escalation of aggression transformed confrontation into national consolidation through bans on pro-Russian outlets and proactive debunking. Moldova and Georgia illustrate division: in Moldova, pro-Russian actors mobilised nostalgia and fear while pro-European elites countered with alternative commemorations and energy diversification; in Georgia, ruling elites

increasingly echoed Russian talking points, polarising the public sphere. Armenia exemplifies disillusionment, as reliance collapsed after the 2020 Karabakh war, transforming Moscow's image from protector to unreliable partner. Azerbaijan demonstrates selectivity: narratives were appropriated to limit Western influence but lacked resonance due to colonial memory. These patterns show that Russian narratives are not uniformly effective; their impact depends on alignment with domestic political needs, historical memory, and lived security experiences.

The third finding is that **the credibility of Russia's security claims emerges as the linchpin of its entire narrative architecture**, since the promise of protection underpins and legitimises the other frames. In Armenia, Russia's failure to intervene during the 2020 Karabakh war shattered its image as guarantor of stability, provoking demonstrations and calls to withdraw from the CSTO. In Ukraine, escalation of aggression rendered Moscow's security discourse untenable, exposing it instead as a cover for imperial ambitions. In Georgia and Moldova, by contrast, fear-based narratives retained traction because ruling elites instrumentalised them to consolidate support, even as Russia's credibility was increasingly questioned. Without plausible security claims, Russia's broader discursive project falters, as the axis around which its identity, historical, and democracy narratives revolve loses coherence.

Fourthly, China's narratives, though far less visible than Russia's, provide a pragmatic counterpoint to Moscow's confrontational style. **Chinese messaging emphasises economic cooperation, sovereignty, and governance exchange, avoiding overt geopolitical antagonism and projecting a uniform narrative of "China as a positive alternative."** Georgia proved the most receptive, culminating in the 2023 Strategic Partnership Document that praised Chinese modernisation as "a new option for mankind" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Georgia 2023). Belarus also aligned closely with Beijing, portraying China as technologically advanced and a future global leader. Elsewhere, narratives remained marginal: in Moldova and Armenia, China's emphasis on sovereignty and plural forms of democracy was noted, while Azerbaijan prioritised economic ties but resisted political alignment. This softer approach highlights the contrast: whereas Russia sought to delegitimise the West through confrontation and coercion, China positioned itself as a pragmatic partner offering economic benefits without imposing geopolitical dilemmas.

The fifth finding is that **narrative penetration is not automatic but contingent on domestic political needs, historical memory, and the perceived credibility of external actors**. In contexts where governments seek external narratives to delegitimise opposition, as in Georgia and Moldova, Russian messaging finds fertile ground. Where societies mobilise against aggression, as in Ukraine and Armenia after 2020, such narratives collapse under the weight of lived experience. In Azerbaijan, colonial memory shapes reception: Russian narratives are selectively appropriated by the government but lack broader resonance. By contrast, in settings where governments actively pursue partnership, such as Georgia and Belarus, Chinese narratives gain visibility. This demonstrates that external influence succeeds or fails depending on how it interacts with local political agendas and collective memory, rather than on the narratives themselves.

## 5 Meta-Analysis: Discursive and Relational Coherence in EU Democracy Promotion

Coherence in democracy promotion is often treated as a matter of internal consistency: whether the European Union speaks with one voice, whether its instruments align with its stated values, whether its practices match its rhetoric (e.g. Young 2001; Börzel and Lebanidze 2017; Rabinovych and Novakova 2019). Yet the evidence shows that coherence is far more complex. It is not simply about discursive stability but also about how meanings travel, how they are received, and how they are contested. Coherence is therefore both discursive and relational: it concerns the stability of democratic language across levels and actors, and the credibility and resonance of that language in diverse contexts.

The meta-analysis of our empirical material reveals that **coherence is a dynamic achievement**. It is produced through reflexive self-understanding, articulated and reframed across institutional and societal actors, and



constantly tested against external contestation. What emerges is a picture of coherence as fragile, uneven, and contingent, yet also demonstrating a certain degree of adaptivity and resilience.

**Discursive coherence** rests on the ability of democratic language to remain recognisable across different sites of articulation. At the level of EU institutions, this language is highly codified, anchored in treaties, charters, and association agreements. Its formulaic repetition provides stability and predictability, reinforcing the Union's identity as a norm-bearing actor. Yet once this language enters discursive spaces in the EN region, coherence becomes uneven. Civil society actors often replicate EU frames with fidelity, sometimes even intensifying them by adding participatory, egalitarian, or feminist dimensions (Gomza, et al. 2025). In doing so, they not only sustain coherence but expand it, producing innovative local varieties of democratic discourse. Ukraine exemplifies this dynamic, where civil society has generated a resilient and creative democratic vocabulary even under conditions of war, as demonstrated specifically by the case of Ukraine.

**Relational coherence**, however, depends on how this language is received and trusted (Dandashly and Noutcheva 2022; Sloomaeckers 2025). Official discourses frequently diverge: some regimes invert democratic language to delegitimise both EU norms and domestic opposition; others adapt selectively, emphasising sovereignty or security while downplaying checks and balances; still others oscillate, embracing democratic language during moments of transformation but narrowing it under geopolitical pressure. These divergences fragment coherence, producing asymmetries between civil society and official actors, and raising questions of credibility in the eyes of local constituencies.

**External contestation compounds this fragmentation.** Russia advances a coherent counter-architecture that reframes democracy as destabilising, alien, and sovereignty-eroding (Raik, et al. 2024). Its narratives are confrontational, tailored to exploit domestic vulnerabilities, and mutually reinforcing across identity, history, security, and sovereignty. China, by contrast, projects a softer, pragmatic narrative of democracy as plural and sovereignty-respecting, emphasising economic cooperation rather than ideological confrontation. Together, these rival discourses challenge the EU's ability to sustain coherence, forcing its language to compete in a crowded and contested relational field.

Coherence, then, is not a static property but a dynamic process. It is sustained through codification and replication, expanded through innovation, fragmented through selective adaptation, and challenged by external contestation. Its resilience depends on the interplay between discursive stability and relational credibility.

From this broader picture of coherence as both discursive and relational, we now turn to its most perilous waters — four focal points that reveal how democracy promotion is challenged, fragmented, and re-anchored in practice.

First, **reflexivity sailing between replication and contestation.** The interplay between reflexive self-perceptions, domestic replication, and external contestation reveals the first major tension, undermining coherence of the EU's democracy promotion in the EN region. As demonstrated by Freyburg, et al. (2025), EU officials do not operate with a single, unified vision of how the Union is perceived abroad; rather, their meta-perceptions range from confidence in the EU's normative authority to anxiety about reputational fragility. These cognitive lenses shape the tone and emphasis of democracy promotion, influencing whether declaratory clarity or cautious engagement dominates. Yet this reflexive variation does not unfold in isolation. Civil society actors in the Eastern Neighbourhood frequently replicate EU frames with fidelity, sometimes even innovating by expanding democratic language to include participatory or egalitarian dimensions (Gomza, et al. 2025). Their replication provides a stabilising force, ensuring that EU discourse remains recognisable even when official actors hesitate or adapt selectively. In this sense, civil society acts as a ballast, counterbalancing reflexive caution within the EU itself.

However, this resilience is constantly tested against external contestation. Russia advances a coherent counter-architecture that reframes democracy as destabilising, alien, or sovereignty-eroding. Its narratives exploit precisely the spaces where EU officials anticipate fragility, amplifying doubts and undermining

declaratory clarity (Raik, et al. 2024). The result is a triangular dynamic: reflexive caution within the EU, replication and innovation by civil society, and systematic reframing by Russia. Discursive coherence depends on how these forces interact — whether civil society’s replication can offset EU caution, and whether that resilience can withstand external contestation. Coherence here is not a given but a precarious equilibrium, sustained only when reflexive self-doubt, domestic replication, and external challenge are held in balance.

Second, **formulaic beacons risk rigidity but can be rescued by innovation**. Another persistent dilemmas in discursive coherence lies in the tension between declaratory clarity and engagement-oriented adaptability. Declaratory instruments, with their reliance on codified references and formulaic language, provide stability and signal normative authority. Yet their very predictability risks rigidity: repeated invocations of treaties, charters, or conditionality can appear hollow if they are not accompanied by substantive resonance in local contexts. This rigidity is particularly vulnerable to external contestation. Russia’s narrative of “Western-imposed democracy” thrives on portraying declaratory language as intrusive and manipulative, exploiting the impression that EU discourse is formulaic and disconnected from lived realities (Raik, et al. 2024). In such settings, declaratory clarity alone cannot sustain coherence; it risks becoming a beacon that guides no one, shining brightly but failing to connect.

Civil society innovation offers a crucial corrective. In Ukraine, NGOs have expanded democratic language to include anti-corruption, decentralisation, and digital governance, refreshing EU frames and making them locally meaningful. In Armenia, civil society has introduced feminist and participatory dimensions, broadening the scope of democracy discourse beyond EU formulae. These innovations rescue declaratory clarity from rigidity, ensuring that democratic language remains dynamic and responsive. At the same time, engagement strategies provide a buffer against rival narratives. China’s softer messaging, emphasising sovereignty and cooperation, demonstrates the value of adaptable engagement in contexts where declaratory rigidity is easily exploited. Discursive coherence thus emerges only when declaratory clarity is revitalised by civil society innovation and reinforced by engagement that counters external contestation without diluting normative identity.

Third, **shifting security tides steer democracy between resilience and instrumentalisation**. Security has become a decisive filter through which democracy promotion is articulated and received. The collapse of Russia’s credibility as a guarantor of stability in Armenia after 2020, and the escalation of aggression in Ukraine, revealed how external security failures reshape the discursive environment. In these contexts, EU democracy promotion acquired a new inflection: democracy was increasingly framed not only as a normative good but as a condition of resilience and sovereignty. This recalibration after 2022 marked a shift in emphasis — democracy discourse was tied more closely to survival and protection, signalling that coherence depends on the ability to connect democratic language with security realities.

Yet this shift is not uniform. Reflexive concerns within the EU temper how boldly democracy is linked to security, with some officials wary of over-promising in fragile environments. In the neighbourhood, regimes often instrumentalise democracy narrowly, presenting it as a tool for sovereignty or peace, while civil society continues to sustain broader liberal and participatory dimensions. The interplay shows that discursive coherence in democracy promotion is conditioned by security credibility: when external guarantees collapse, EU discourse must adapt, and its coherence depends on whether civil society can maintain breadth while official actors and external challengers narrow the frame.

Forth, rather unconventionally, **democracy promotion should be recognised as cargo in convoys of survival and prosperity**. Relational coherence in the neighbourhood rarely arises from democracy discourse alone. Instead, it is produced when democratic language is bundled with other imperatives that carry immediate weight for local actors. In contexts of insecurity, democracy is reframed as resilience and sovereignty — a vocabulary of survival that ties democratic practice to the capacity to withstand external aggression or internal fragility. In contexts of economic aspiration, democracy is articulated as a condition of modernisation and cooperation — a pathway to prosperity, investment, and integration. In both cases, democracy travels not as an autonomous beacon but as a secondary cargo, attached to vessels whose credibility derives from protection or growth.



This dynamic exposes a paradox at the heart of EU democracy promotion. The Union's normative clarity, so central to its self-identity (e.g. Manners 2002), gains relational coherence only when tethered to material assurances of survival or prosperity. Standalone declaratory discourse risks irrelevance, shining brightly but failing to connect with the lived priorities of neighbourhood actors. Coherence, therefore, depends less on the EU's ability to project democratic language in isolation than on its capacity to embed that language within credible guarantees of security and economic opportunity. Democracy sails not as the flagship but as cargo aboard the convoy of protection and prosperity, its coherence contingent on whether those vessels are trusted to reach safe harbour.

Taken together, these four focal points demonstrate that coherence in EU democracy promotion is neither automatic nor assured. It is shaped by reflexive variation within EU institutions, the tension between declaratory clarity and innovation, the impact of shifting security environments, and the need to link democratic language to material assurances of protection and prosperity. Coherence emerges as a contingent outcome of these interactions, continually challenged and re-negotiated in practice. Its durability depends on the Union's capacity to balance discursive stability with relational credibility across diverse contexts.

## 6 Conclusion

This report set out to assess the coherence of EU democracy promotion in the EN region by synthesising three REDEMOS working papers through a combined discursive and relational lens. The analysis demonstrates that coherence cannot be reduced to institutional alignment or rhetorical consistency alone. Rather, it emerges as a dynamic and contingent quality, produced through reflexive self-understandings within the EU, discursive interactions with neighbourhood actors, and sustained contestation by external normative contenders.

Empirically, the findings show that EU democracy promotion operates in an environment marked by fragmentation but also by notable resilience. At the level of EU institutions, democracy discourse remains highly codified and recognisable, providing stability and continuity. Yet coherence is uneven once this discourse travels into the EN region. Civil society actors often act as key carriers and innovators of EU democratic language, sustaining and expanding its meaning even under authoritarian pressure or wartime conditions. Official discourses, by contrast, frequently adapt selectively, instrumentalise democratic concepts, or reject them outright, producing asymmetries that complicate both discursive and relational coherence.

External contestation further intensifies these challenges. Russia's confrontational narrative architecture and China's pragmatic, sovereignty-focused messaging both expose the limits of standalone declaratory democracy promotion. In this context, the credibility of democracy discourse increasingly depends on its ability to connect with material concerns such as security, resilience, and economic opportunity. Democracy promotion proves most coherent where it is embedded within broader and trusted pathways to protection and prosperity, rather than projected as an abstract normative ideal.

Taken together, the analysis suggests that coherence in EU democracy promotion should be understood as an ongoing process of negotiation rather than an achievable end state. Its durability hinges on balancing discursive stability with adaptability, normative clarity with engagement, and internal reflexivity with external credibility. For EU policymakers, this implies moving beyond the quest for "one voice" towards strategies that recognise plural pathways to coherence, actively support civil society as a stabilising force, and situate democratic commitments within credible security and socio-economic frameworks. In an era of intensified geopolitical contestation, sustaining coherence is less about perfect consistency and more about maintaining intelligibility, trust, and resonance across diverse and contested contexts.

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**Dr Mădălina Dobrescu, NTNU**  
**info@redemos.eu**

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